

## *Transnational Literature*

November 2012

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# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Adam Aitken, *Eighth Habitation: New Poems* (Giramondo, 2009)

Diversity often connotes looking 'forward' to Asia, cosmopolitanism looking 'back' to Europe. As exhilarating as the recent transnational turn in Australian literature studies has been in its dispelling of limiting territorial stereotypes, it has not fundamentally altered the way the world is seen outside Australia. Europe stands for sophistication and nuance; Asia for alterity and exoticism. There are many delights and opportunities for wisdom in Adam Aitken's collection, but the overriding theme is expanding our idea of cosmopolitanism. Thus this is not a book about Asians as other or Australians in Asia. But neither is it a book covering traditional Asia except as encountered in (to the extent that the phrase is plausibly un-ironic) contemporary civilisation, any more than a Peter Porter or an Andrew Sant write about Europe 'as such'.

Even this extended notion of cosmopolitanism, though, has its challenges. Cosmopolitanism often means, *de facto*, the meeting of transnational or transcultural elites; people with the means to travel and the cultural orientation to cross boundaries, see them as permeable. When Aitken writes about Cambodia, a country devastated by war, cruelty and ideological turmoil, he makes more visceral, affective demands of cosmopolitanism than is usually done, to mark war, trauma and ideologically motivated cruelty as distinctly Asian would be horrendously wrong; they have occurred just as much, or even more in, Europe, and as a thinker such as Pierre Clastres has shown, may even be inherent in an idea of the state itself. But in a poem such as 'A Map of Cambodia', Aitken is aware that the subject stretches accustomed mode of poetry:

Does anyone out here deserve thanks?  
For the map?  
Magenta for bombed areas  
Beaches named after hotels  
Islands sold off to foreigners  
Note the tipsled effects of forced evictions.  
Shaded areas mean gas,  
One piece for the Thais, another for the Viets and BHP. (79)

Obviously, there is a sense of the map and the poem as analogous modes of representation (on think a bit of Kevin Hart's poem 'The Map' here): accurate on one epistemic level, inherently flawed on another. The dry tone both attests to and mocks this representative quality. Moreover, there is a sense of a palimpsest here, as valence of a generation ago is interlaced with later neoliberal extraction and exploitation. Ironies abound: the Vietnamese, still Communist, once military occupiers of Cambodia, are now cooperating with the Australian conglomerate BHP in extracting oil; the appalling condominium prophesied at the end of Orwell's *Animal Farm*. The map is informative, tells us the truth about this; but we need another layer of awareness to diagnose and understand this. Yet if the map is fallible, surely the poem can be also? The poem is not content to remain on its level; it aspires to a less demarcated realm.

A river flowing backwards  
When you need it.

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This soul's consolation, though, is only available in the past: not so much a literal past but a prelapsarian residue of consciousness. There is no utopian, imaginative agenda; just a moment of ease, what in a European context would be *dolce far niente*. To abide monochromatically on an urbane, cosmopolitan level would be an imprisonment, whatever its reach. Yet these poems, which stretch for a more emotional dimension, cannot find it in a way with which their self-consciousness would abide in a totally comfortable manner. In 'Siem Reap Dawn', the first of the sequence 'Postcards (after Michelle Cahill)', Aitken describes the storied city near the Thai border and Angkor Wat in a resolutely unromantic way:

TV going off and on  
I sip beer with the Russians  
The rodents have all been eaten.  
And Buddha hung with fairy lights  
Visibly delighted  
Withdraws cash from an ATM. (85)

At first this might seem a parable of the triumph of worldwide capitalism with only a soupçon of regret, in the mode of a Pico Iyer. But the past cannot be eliminated totally; the Russians probably are ultimately there because of the role of their former Vietnamese clients in Cambodia. And why have the rodents been eaten? Because people are hungry? Suffering, famine, desperation is alluded to here, even in this most anecdotal and lucid of poems. One can sense occasions where deep feeling might manifest itself; but it is only accessible by evocation, always at a remove. The emotions that are present are, again, ones of ease, of enjoyment from the acceptance of the given and circumstantial, as in another postcard poem, 'Singkhran, Siem Reap River':

So much to celebrate, and lives are short.  
Chasing snakes or frogs  
Harvesting morning glory

In The Raffles Hotel gardens.  
What I wish for  
Is a place to park my bike, a table to write on, some roses,  
A waterfall ... (91)

This is not utopian. It is a step above the functional; relaxation, ease, comfort, tranquility, yet in a war-ravaged, now capitalism-permeated land such as Cambodia (yes there is a Raffles Hotel in Siem Reap, he does not mean the one in Singapore), such ease may indeed be utopian, and its very possibility, given the events of the past four decades, a great moral victory. Aitken is both passionate and scrupulous; and to get insights like this one has to attend to his poems with a virtuosity analogous to that with which he so gracefully and thoughtfully composes them.

As a reader I would like to see more emotion but as a critic I am fully cognisant of why it is not there, that its relative absence is a mode of askesis, of knowing and culturally

sensitive austerity. A far earlier Anglophone poem about Cambodia, James Fenton's 'Children in Exile', allows considerably more emotion – and is far more directly about the Khmer Rouge atrocities – but also risks far greater sentimentality. Aitken's coruscating intelligence will not let itself be pinned down like this. Sometimes, as in 'Translations from the Malay, 1930', there is a sense of greater difficulty in the negotiations between languages, contexts, discourses. Much as in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée*, a translation exercise is used both to reflect the inherent inequality that exists when one language is that of the coloniser and the other that of the colonised, but also to point out how such exercises, even if discursively necessary, are always absurd instances of aporia. Here, the seamless cosmopolitan voice is bursting with the awareness of roadblocks, gaps, and missed crossings. But generally a spirit of urbane sophistication predominates here, an Asian classicism not in terms of its indebtedness to T'ang dynasty poetry and so on but in the way it generally resides in, and revises, the classical temperament. In our day, the classical temper, to be other than stick-figure, must be multicultural, diasporic. Indeed a classical temper can even evade certain romantic dangers of multiculturalism – essentialism, nationalism, excessive othering.

But Aitken's poetry can also contain considerable emotion. 'Dukkha (craving)', my favourite poem in the book, again a part of the Postcards sequence, begins startlingly:

It came as a surprise, most of all to me,  
 To have come this close  
 To a thug's approach  
 To ritual sacrifice (89)

The stance of the assured observer is jolted, made aware of its potential vulnerability to more primal forces. The speaker realises the relative luxury of his present life and hearkens back to a possible past life of even greater opulence, sharply rebuked by the chastening of *samsara*. 'Dukkha' usually translated as 'suffering', manifests itself here as the margin between false sense of life being 'paid for/debt free': and the larger reality of ontological vulnerability, *Dukkha* stands for both what must be gained from the past, from knowledge in general, and as a sign that knowledge alone cannot suffice, cannot conceal the reality of suffering, always one step away. Few would imagine craving suffering, but suffering is sometimes need to pierce complacency, to remind us that we cannot hope, whether personally or culturally, to get ahead of the balance of life.

Aitken is a poet capable of conceiving an ambitious, cross-cultural agenda and more often than not realising it. His poems fulfill the old Horatian ideal of both teaching and delighting; and also make us aware that we will only be truly cultured when an Asian reference comes as easily to mind here as does a European.

**Nicholas Birns**

## Teju Cole, *Open City* (Faber and Faber, 2011)

On reaching a scene near the end of Teju Cole's novel I had to reassess what I thought I knew about the narrator Julius, a young psychiatrist of Nigerian and German background. He has an encounter with a friend who tells him something startling and disturbing, to both him and the reader. It was on the second reading of this absorbing and satisfying novel, with this scene in mind, that I began to see his central character a little better, and to understand the multiple layers of meaning and the myriad interplays between identity, literature, culture, race, suffering, and death. It is one of those books that contains worlds.

New York is the 'open city', one that Julius walks around, and observes in detail. Or should I say, detail as *he* sees it, because the only point of view the reader has is Julius', so we do not know what he is not seeing, and not telling us. He sees a lot, both present and past, including the memorial for an African burial ground that reminds him of the thousands of enslaved bodies under his feet. History, skin, identity, 'white' and 'black', they all clash continuously, every day. Boundaries are blurred, it seems, and everything is open to discussion and interpretation.

The character reads books by authors such as Roland Barthes and Tahar Ben Jelloun, and listens to the music of Mahler. He has, or had, a girlfriend, who is now in San Francisco. Julius' father died of tuberculosis when he was not quite fifty, and his only son fourteen; one chapter describes the funeral and the relief of children unable to stop laughing at spilled rice:

it is impossible for me, even now, to think of the events of that day, wreathed as they were in sorrow, without feeling a certain gratitude to those children, all younger than eight, who fell under the momentary spell of mirth and let air into a room that the rites of death had been asphyxiating. (227)

Death and suffering recur throughout, in references to his patients, to birds, to other people both as individuals and groups, and to his revered old teacher and mentor, Professor Saito, who taught early English Literature and is now ill with cancer. Julius tells us he learnt 'the art of listening' (7) from him, but strangely he also seems to suggest that his mind wanders when with Dr Saito. Remembering and forgetting feature strongly, both collective and individual. Finally, Julius is unable to face his mentor's death, and even feels disappointed that the old man was unable to give him any 'words of wisdom' from the threshold. It is a somewhat banal stance, and commented upon by a friend, who says 'I wonder why so many people view sickness as a moral test' (180). But Julius, of course, is suffering himself, and somewhat alone – estranged from his mother after leaving Nigeria, father dead, girlfriend gone, mentor dying.

On a plane flight to Brussels, a vacation he takes supposedly to find his maternal grandmother, he meets a retired surgeon, Dr Annette Maillotte, who tells him all manner of things about her own life and that of others, and they later meet for a meal. He tells her of two men he has become friends with in Brussels, Farouq and Khalil, both originally from Morocco, with whom he has intense discussions about politics and culture. But when he tells Dr Maillotte of Farouq's disgust with the university's rejection of his Master's thesis (issues of post-9/11 sensitivities), she is dismissive: 'if you're too loyal to your own suffering, you forget that others suffer, too' (143). It is a jarring statement, given that she has suffered tragedy herself, but it also has implications that spread through the arc of the novel.

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There is a section in which Julius describes the city as a palimpsest. He is in view of the wound of the twin towers, walking on an overpass – ‘the one that once connected the World Financial Center to the buildings that stood on the site’ (57) – and notes the destruction and construction, repeated over and over through time, ‘as was all the city, written, erased, rewritten’ (59). Teju Cole has presented not only the city as a palimpsest, but his character Julius as well, and that of the lives of others around him. We learn about him gradually, not knowing his name until the twelfth page, and continue to encounter layers of his personality. There are no answers, no neat endings, because the questions are ongoing: identity, race, relationships, sex, power, atrocity, death.

The idea of the self is crucial here, too. In encountering the revelation towards the end of the story, the reader sees clearly how Julius’ perception of himself is rudely altered, even shattered. Cole preempts this moment with his character commenting on the need for us to use the self as a ‘calibration point for normalcy’ (243), to see ourselves as ‘not the villains of our own stories’. Julius has, earlier on, ‘fallen in love with’ the idea of ‘the listener, the compassionate African who paid attention to the details of someone else’s life and struggle’ (70) after he had visited a detention facility for undocumented immigrants with his girlfriend Nadège as part of her church group. Julius is not a ‘do-gooder’, and distrusts the impulse in himself and others most of the time. Even in listening to the young man from Liberia, Julius cannot fully trust his story, thinking it a ‘natural’ impulse to disbelieve it (67). But what he does believe in is perhaps a mystery to him as well. Underlying all of this is the memory of a dead father and a grieving teenage boy; perhaps of grief unfinished.

Teju Cole’s writing is elegant, fluent, and seamless. His characters, major and minor, are exquisitely developed. He has published one previous book, a novella called *Every Day is for the Thief* (only available in Nigeria at present), but he has written essays for numerous publications and is at work on a non-fiction narrative of Lagos. He is also an art historian and photographer. Clearly, observation is something he has developed keenly, and it shows in *Open City*.

**Sue Bond**

**Tabish Khair, *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position* (Fourth Estate, 2012)**

A bus trip between small towns in northern India, a Berlin-based student researching cinema history, a dispute between phrenologists in Victorian London, and three men sharing a flat in contemporary Århus, Denmark: what could be the link between these four situations? The answer is that they are all encompassed by the creative imagination of Tabish Khair in his four novels: *The Bus Stopped* (2004), *Filming* (2007), *The Thing about Thugs* (2010) and *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position*, published earlier this year. Clearly each of these novels takes a very different trajectory, but there is a common root in the Indian state of Bihar, where Khair was born. He now lives and works, like his unnamed narrator in *How to Fight Islamist Terror*, in Denmark, but the reader will realise quite soon that this is far from autobiography, and that there is considerable distance between the author and his creation.

Khair is endlessly inventive, without indulging in the 'lazy evasiveness' he complains of in many recent 'post-colonial' novels.<sup>1</sup> His first novel, *The Bus Stopped*, is the only successful novel I know of which has no main characters. *Filming* is a lovely, mysterious work, based on the early days of Indian cinema, pre-Bollywood. *The Thing about Thugs* shows Victorian London, so familiar from Sherlock Holmes books, from an unfamiliar and highly ironised perspective. And *How to Fight Islamist Terror* is an unreliable first-person narrative addressed to an implied reader who is presumed to know the ending, which for the first-time reader is, of course, impossible.

That fact is not immediately obvious, though. When he first claims that 'I am not writing a novel. This is an account of events that you have read about' (52), the reader will probably think he is referring to the Danish cartoons affair of 2005, or the Norway shootings in 2011. But these events come and go in the background without playing a significant role in the plot. Despite the explicit intention of the narrator to relate the events leading up to the infamous events he mentions, which we are led to expect, both by the title and by the hints of the narrator, will involve some kind of Islamist terror, the engine that drives this novel is a really a story of friendship and love, misunderstanding, betrayal and pain.

The narrator, an English literature academic at the university in Århus, in his 'first full-time position, with the carrot of tenure tied to its stick of pedagogic overwork' (3) (clearly universities are the same all over the world) is from a Pakistani Muslim family, but is an intolerant unbeliever. Together with his friend Ravi, an Indian Hindu, he moves in with another Indian, a devout Muslim named Karim, older than both of them by ten years or so. Ravi seems intrigued and impressed by Karim's religious rituals and starts to attend his regular discussion meetings, while the narrator scorns them: 'I grew up with politics beating down on me. Basically, it boils down to three points: the Quran is the final hand-autographed word of God; the West is fucking us; the Jews are fucking us via the West' (30). Ravi retorts, 'Listen to yourself, yaar. You sound like a Danish tabloid.'

Khair's genius for characterisation is demonstrated on every page. Ravi, especially, is a wonderfully vivid character, brilliant in every way, attractive, witty, and more broadminded than his friend despite his sharp tongue. He is an inveterately nosy gossip: he has within him

<sup>1</sup> Tabish Khair, 'The Laziness of Magical Realism,' *Hindu* 5 August 2007.

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what the narrator calls his 'aunts', irrepressibly curious about other people's business. But 'there was a kind of cynicism in Ravi that either denoted too much knowledge or too much innocence' (26), especially in his relations with the opposite sex. Then he meets the beautiful, poised and flawless Lena, a Danish girl, and falls in love seriously for the first time. Khair, a renowned poet as well as a novelist, hits on the perfect words to convey precisely how the narrator comes to realise that something is different: 'Ravi had never offered to introduce me to any of his girlfriends in the past and that too with such brusque tentativeness' (66). Later, when things are not going well between the couple, the narrator is reluctant to question Ravi about it. 'It was not just the suffering in his eyes that prevented me; it was his need to hide the suffering' (160).

Despite these flashes of perceptiveness, the narrator has several blind spots. Like Jane Austen's Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse, he lets his prejudices influence his judgement. The narrator of *The Thing About Thugs* is reluctantly impressed, despite post-colonial reservations, by Austen's insight, and this novel, too, is suffused with her spirit in many ways – along with that of many of the other 'Eng Lit' writers the narrator teaches. I wonder if Lena does not owe something to Austen's Jane Fairfax: the perfect, composed, accomplished young woman who turns out to be more vulnerable than she seems. Nowhere is Khair's consummate skill more evident than in his portrait of Lena. The narrator dislikes her, and blames her for Ravi's anguish, and this is clearest when he says, 'Let me try and be fair to Lena. I know my vision of her is clouded by the pain that I thought I detected on Ravi's face' (155). But this is actually more of a comment on the narrator than on Lena: we have already, behind the narrator's back, as it were, formed a different picture of her. She is a fragile spirit, easily hurt but hampered by her upbringing from showing her pain and, in the end, losing everything by her appearance of poise and control.

I have perhaps given the impression that *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position* is a sombre book about unhappy love and troubled minority politics. Partly it is, but it is also playful, postmodern in the best sense (we'll forgive Khair the wry metafictional reference to a story 'by an Indian writer – a chap called Khair' [160]), and sublimely entertaining. Tabish Khair has won an All India Poetry prize, but hasn't yet cracked a major fiction prize, despite being frequently shortlisted. I don't know why this should be, since he is writing some of the most subtle, accomplished and enjoyable novels being published today.

**Gillian Dooley**



## Russel Banks, *Lost Memory of Skin* (Clerkenwell Press, 2011)

Russel Banks's new novel *Lost Memory of Skin* has enough potential to be charted in the best-sellers. The novel engages the reader from the very first scene, as soon as the protagonist walks into a Florida library to access Internet to confirm whether his name appears on the database of national sex-offenders.

At a young age of twenty-two, he is a paroled sex-offender, fettered to a GPS monitoring device. As a young man he must create a life for himself in the wake of captivity. Known only as the Kid, and on probation after having been convicted of soliciting sex with a minor, he spends three months in jail and is released on good behaviour into a world where he is forbidden for the next ten years both to leave the jurisdiction and to reside within 2,500 feet of anywhere children might gather. The novel's epigraph is from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* – 'Now I am ready to tell how bodies changed into different bodies'; it possibly indicates the changes brought to the human body by the dictates of technology. With nowhere else to go, the Kid, with his pet iguana Iggy in tow, has found refuge under a south Florida causeway. There he becomes part of a makeshift tent peopled by other sex offenders. It is a repugnant, murky place occupied by hollow, ruined people that surely multiplies his agony and augments his miseries in an already troubled life. Repeatedly ignored by his self-indulgent mother, he grew up with his pet iguana for close family and an excessive early-teenage porn habit. His mother did not know the Kid's father for long. She had a lot of boyfriends who found the Kid troublesome. And she tossed him away once he committed the crime; it is not surprising that as a preteen without friends – except for his giant pet iguana, Iggy – the Kid fell into the dark domain of online porn to appease his isolation and boredom. After jumping onto a chat line on Craigslist, the Kid arranged to meet an underage girl 'brandi18' at her home while her parents were away. Recently discharged from the Army for planning to distribute pornography to his fellow soldiers in an effort to win favour, and now unemployed, the Kid arrived for the rendezvous via city bus with a backpack full of beer, condoms, X-rated movies, lubricant and high hopes 'to bump up against and break through an invisible membrane between the perfectly controlled world locked inside his head and the endlessly overflowing unpredictable, dangerous world outside' (220). Instead, he was greeted by Brandi's father and five cops. Banks scores points in painting a character 'more sinn'd against than sinning', as he is innocent; the only skin he has encountered is his own while masturbating. This revelation surely succeeds in garnering sympathy for the Kid.

The plot takes an exciting turn when a local professor, an academic of colossal size and intellect, who has cautiously erected a realm, based on his secrets and lies, barges in to find in the Kid, the perfect subject, apparently to further his research into sex offenders and homelessness. The Professor extends his voluntary help to the Kid who is slightly sceptical but yielding. When the camp beneath the causeway is scattered by the police, and later, when a hurricane destroys the shelter, the Professor tries to help the Kid in routine matters while trying to teach his young charge new ways of looking at, and understanding, what he has done. But when the Professor's past reemerges and threatens to destroy his carefully constructed world, the steadiness of the two men's relationship is shaken. In the interests of so-called research, he gradually entices the Kid to describe why he was forced to leave the Army and exactly how damaging the Kid's addiction to online pornography has been. 'Unlike the kid, the Professor makes a sharp distinction between plans and fantasies' (157). The Professor expounds convincing ideas, and his ideas 'are rapidly evolving':

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When a society commodifies its children by making them into a consumer group, dehumanizing them by converting them into a crucial, locked-in segment of the economy, and then proceeds to eroticize its products in order to sell them, the children gradually come to be perceived by the rest of the community and by the children themselves as sexual objects. (159)

His assertion about pedophilia: 'If it is a mental illness, then the entire society is to one degree or another sick with it. Which makes it normal' (163) inflates his position as a thinker of a standing.

The novel is not without weaknesses. The weakness is exposed with the emergence of a new figure, the Writer, who appears all of a sudden to preach to the Kid. His sudden appearance on the stage is meant to resolve mysteries but he ends up giving birth to many more unsolved questions. And the revelation that the library assistant who helps the Kid in the first scene is actually the Professor's wife is an unpersuasive coincidence.

Banks greatest prowess lies in delineating characters with much precision. He has specialised in painting characters with *hamartia* which guarantees a disproportionate punishment. He is undoubtedly one of the most accomplished fiction writers of America, but he loses the grip of the plot when a magazine writer who, as Banks describes him, looks a little like both Ernest Hemingway and Banks himself, jumps in and starts professing profound ideas. The excessive preaching makes a dent in the credibility of the character. It seems as if Banks could not hold himself back from intervening in the matter. The writer fails to flesh out credibility to his characters when he tightens a rope around their neck enslaving them as his mouthpiece.

The book articulates the view that we live in a spooky world where the 'time is out of joint'. The novel lays bare a comprehensive view of American moral vision and its hypocrisy. By peeping into their unexplored life, the novel uncovers the maltreatment of sex offenders by society. The novel proffers many questions to solve, the reader automatically relates to characters and tries to decipher unsolved mysteries.

In some respects, in *Lost Memory of Skin* two different plots compete for attention, both interesting but somehow not fully moulded. The Professor's incomprehensible interest in the Kid excites the reader to know 'what happens next' but fails to address 'why'. The revelation of stratified selves of the Professors past life does not suit the movement of the plot. Nevertheless, *Lost Memory of Skin* is a compelling read.

**Vivek Kumar Dwivedi**

**Luke Davies, *Interferon Psalms* (Allen & Unwin, 2011)**

*Interferon Psalms* engages us in a feeling of shock revelation. Luke Davies explores illness, the end of a relationship and the disturbance of relocation. The work's profundity lies elsewhere than in these literal events. *Interferon Psalms* is about darkness and illumination.

The poem consists of five parts. There are a total of thirty-three psalms or cantos. *Interferon Psalms* won the inaugural Prime Minister's Prize for Poetry. The collection is sub-titled '33 psalms on the 99 names of God'. In its meditations on suffering, the collection functions as a *Song of Praise* as much as complaint. God is variously exalted and lamented, from the grave 'O Holy One of Being' (3) to the lyrical 'O Witness, O Word, O Diadem of Beauty' (5) and even the ironic 'O Infinite One, O Restorer, / O Guide, O Enricher' (25). The exaltations and laments multiply. In deliverance mode, the final psalm praises God's making in the world as much as expresses the speaker's throes of happiness and pain. The canto opens with:

God has made laughter  
—*I behaved myself wisely in a perfect way—*

continues further below with:

God has made laughter for me, and all who hear of it  
will laugh  
—*Oxygen was the fabric of my exultation—*

and concludes this section of the canto with:

God has made laughter  
—*Everything present at once, as it always was—* (107-108)

In its unfolding, the poem reveals the awe of a physical struggle transformed into a spiritual agon. As the speaker says,

Skin turned to scale. Head peeled away. I am Reptile,  
hear me roar. (3)

The exalted language of spiritual darkness and illumination does business with the mock language of the ordinary. In a secular age not given to elations of feeling, what language is a poet to use when they find themselves in a state of despair? In psalm 32, the speaker provides an answer:

One becomes more completely a poet  
In travelling from Babylon to Jerusalem. (106)

Such lines suggest that *Interferon Psalms* is a poem about making art as much as suffering. Through the speaker's referencing of his suffering, *Interferon Psalms* assumes its position as

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a tonally layered meditation on existential anguish and deliverance. The speaker signals the layered terrain of *Interferon Psalms* when he begins with the mock incantation:

Lift up our hearts.  
Lift up our hearts. So then, lift up our hearts. (3)

The speaker may exhort us to lift up our hearts, in the tradition of a congregation, but he does so with the exhaustion of a secular man doing push-ups for the first time. This exhaustion may be the effect of his treatment with interferon, a drug for clearing the system of Hepatitis C, but the speaker's illness, loss and dislocation become metaphors for a deeper struggle for deliverance. As the speaker says, 'On this earth I learned all about suffering' (3). The speaker, steeped in Biblical and other imagery, floods the dry shores of consternation with the rich waters of the sacred. As a mock spiritual text, *Interferon Psalms* becomes the record of a holy struggle. Like a mystic seeking an encounter with God, the speaker must submit to the disorienting confusions of his treatment with interferon:

I would write nothing, from the perfect centre of a  
monstrous place, O Holy One of Being. Nothing at all: that  
was my plan. I had to gather the forces of my memory and  
I had to trust my memory. But first I had to allow sheer  
bewilderment to flow through me. (3-4)

His treatment unfolds as his relationship breaks apart and he himself must come to terms with geographic dislocation. He tries to connect with his lover, 'but she gave no traction' (20). In his geographic dislocation, he wonders:

But how can we sing the world song  
In a strange land? (27)

The speaker's course of treatment also brings back to mind his previous drug use. There is dismay and bittersweet recollection:

I remembered my boon companion, a black-bottomed  
spoon. That was a journey and a half! My heart was  
grieved. I was pricked in my veins. (13)

In his condition of pain and other effects of the treatment, in which the speaker cries for mercy and his life is a vapour (31), personal memory and universal remembrance enfold into one another. The speaker recalls how twenty years earlier he was snapped out of his abstraction and he stopped hurting himself (5). In near-hallucinatory state, he witnesses the passing of the aeons. What might be the price for such witnessing? In the second psalm or canto, the speaker reflects on the passing of the ages and on the compromised future:

The ice came back. If you sped up the centuries you could  
hear the morains screeching.

Retreated too. The forests grew again. We would have gone insane with the dripping of the leaves had we been around to hear it. But millions of years passed first. Psychiatry, cathedrals, they hadn't been invented. The rain leached minerals from the ground. Nothing could even take hold as future fossil. (11)

Like a latter-day Dante lost in the woods in the middle of his life, the speaker must confront the reality that 'In the centre of my life I lost its centre' (4). Lost, he must traverse the uneasy terrain of the human condition. His own being threatens to dissolve:

The blade of my happiness broke at the hilt. I flailed,  
without balance, at air. A break at the hilt is a hard break  
to fix. Life in search of a blacksmith. of bellows and tongs  
I knew little. (4)

Ironically, the speaker's karmic debt, his heroin addiction, becomes his karmic release. Whatever the speaker makes out of his illness, the reality is that 'I had imagined many futures but never interferon' (71). Yet interferon is the drug that might heal the legacy of addiction. This is the aching mockery of salvation through the symbol of one's nemesis:

From troubled dreams, the smell of acetate. The membrane  
through which inner and outer exchanged their currency  
was now known as the syringe. Medicinal use only. I had  
long since forgotten its ways. And now you are a 'good  
boy', like a dog. (51)

In the poem's complex articulation of suffering, the chaotic rumble of human existence, from pain to joy, sounds like a bell. In psalmist mode, the speaker says, 'The luminous meets the tenuous; Lord, hear our prayer' (38). Perhaps the one place where celebration and suffering can come together is in poetry, not as release, but as revelation. As the speaker says in psalm or canto twenty-five:

I returned to the poem, the one true place,  
Whose blood was the syntax,  
Whose body was the word. (79)

If such lines work it is because the speaker undoes his own lyricism:

Thus I felt fortunate to have had  
Much experience with blood. (79)

But he also alerts us to the necessity of such tonal play:

Part of the challenge of being heroic:  
The object of my desperation would desert me.



But the desperation wouldn't. (79)

To let such lines wash over one is to experience the lyrical in extravagant flight. The speaker plays with the poem's own compelling reason for being. In self-conscious mode, he says, 'A hummingbird found his way into my poem, look!' (82). It is precisely this tension of the lyrical mode between extravagant flight and ironic interjection that renders the language of *Interferon Psalms* and the poem itself compelling. The hummingbird might fly into the poem, but

It sucked from the stamen of unease  
Until unease was dry, and useless. (82)

This is a poem that becomes a testament to anguish and joy in a language drawn self-consciously from the canon of suffering and celebration. It succeeds because it releases and reins in its ecstasies in equal measure.

**Tina Giannoukos**

**Suzanne Falkiner, *Joan in India* (Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2008)**

India has evoked and continues to evoke a wide range of reactions from both Indians and non-Indians. On the Indian side, responses range from admiration to irritation, with the latter memorably represented by Nirad C. Chaudhuri and V.S. Naipaul.<sup>1</sup> The variety is no less impressive with regards to the way India has been engaged with by non-Indians. In E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924), one of the classic texts of the colonial encounter, one gets to be familiar with most of the Indian as well as non-Indian ways of looking at India, from confusion to empathy, as far as the latter are concerned.

If the preceding paragraph gives a sense of dynamism and movement, it also contains an implied centre around which the crosscurrents of viewing India revolve. Attracting or repelling, India appears to exert a magnetic hold on whosoever cares to turn to it. In a sense, *Joan in India* by Suzanne Falkiner is the story of one such India-crossed Melbourne girl called Joan Falkiner who showed extraordinary courage and determination to go out to India in 1939 to marry her fifty-seven-year-old Indian lover Taley Muhammed Khan, the Nawab of Palanpur, who she had first met two years earlier in Europe at the age of nineteen.<sup>2</sup> The marriage, noted Melbourne *Truth*, gave 'the molars of Melbourne a juicy social morsel to masticate' (4). The liaison of the colonial cousins also caused the colonial bureaucracy both in India and London a good deal of trouble. However, by way of relating the romantic tale of Joan and Taley in the broader context of the British Empire in the twentieth century, Falkiner not only grounds the story in history but also provides an analytical framework by which to explain the inter-colonial relationship.

Deftly combining the skills of an archaeologist with those of a historian, Falkiner goes from one corner of the world to another, to excavate the love story of Joan and the Nawab of Palanpur. The breadth is aptly captured in the titles of the different parts comprising the book: Bombay, Palanpur, London, The South of France. The Prologue sets the scene for the journey which commences in June 1992 and is recounted in snatches throughout the book. The larger blocks of the narrative are the uneven bits and pieces in the historical reconstruction of the lives and times of the two central characters whose romance is both facilitated and hindered by the all-encompassing historical force known as imperialism initiated by modern Europe. Thus history, romance, and travelogue blend, to add a rich, hard-to-define flavour to the narrative, making it difficult for the reader to lay the book aside until finished.

*Joan in India* can also be read as revisionist history in that it challenges nationalist constructions of Indian princely states as dens of backwardness, corruption, exploitation, and extravagance. In his *Autobiography*, for example, Jawaharlal Nehru, first prime minister of independent India, characterises the landlords as a class 'physically and intellectually degenerate.'<sup>3</sup> Nehru goes on to call the landlords 'complete parasites on the land and the

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Chaudhuri's *The Continent of Circe* (1965), Naipaul's *An Area of Darkness* (1964) and *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1977). In a later work called *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990), Naipaul has shifted towards a more positive approach to India.

<sup>2</sup> As the common surname suggests, the author of *Joan in India* (niece) is (distantly) related to her subject Joan (aunt).

<sup>3</sup> Jawaharlal Nehru, *An Autobiography* (1936; Bombay: Allied Publishers, 1962) 58. Subsequent references are to this edition.

people' as well as 'the spoilt children of the British Government.'<sup>4</sup> As far as Nehru was concerned, British colonialism and Indian feudalism were both anti-national forces whose demise was *the* precondition out of which the Indian nation(-state) would emerge. In contrast, the image of Palanpur that emerges in *Joan in India* is that of a small princely state whose 'intelligent' and modern-minded ruler tried by all means to improve the lot of his subjects.

Theoretically-oriented readers, especially those who are still under the deconstructionist spell of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, would find the book most engaging at those moments when the physical journey to retrieve the story of Joan and Taley takes on a spiritual character in the form of self-exploration, with explorer becoming explored in the process, much in the manner of Ronald Ross in Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996). A brief episode in Chapter 23 brilliantly captures how the two roles became reversed at times. On her last day with her subject, Falkiner is still trying to 'tease all sorts of information out of her [Joan]' (269). It is, however, the investigated who outdid the investigator. Always changing the subject of her marriage with the Nawab, Joan finally succeeds in getting the author of *Joan in India* 'drunk ... under the table' (270).

Spanning three continents and divided into four parts, *Joan in India* has thus a meta-narrative consciousness which frequently brings to the fore the difficult question of how history comes to be narrativised out of a complex and dense web of conflicting data. The task of shaping history (not the other way round) into a coherent narrative becomes all the more daunting if the historian has to rely on the (un)reliable memory of others in the absence of historical record. Where did the colonial lovers first meet? There are as many answers as there are storytellers: one informant gives Buckingham Palace as the most likely venue (xiv); another reports that 'Joan and the Nawab had met at a hotel in Switzerland or Germany' (5); Joan herself believes that 'it was in London' that she had met the Nawab (262). Not surprisingly, the author of *Joan in India* who had gone out to *research* Joan ends up humbled: 'Not for the first time, I wondered how much I could trust anyone's account of Joan, least of all her own' (272). No historical reconstruction can possibly aspire to tell the final truth.

Though narrative history in the main, *Joan in India* admirably mixes the genres of adventure, romance, and travelogue, to produce a hybrid work as fascinating as the story of inter-racial relations it sets out to narrate. Masterfully told against a meticulously delineated backdrop of colonial history, the humane tale holds the reader captive just as India had once captivated the nineteen-year-old Melbourne beauty Joan in the form of her lover, the Nawab of Palanpur. On top of everything else, however, if *Joan in India* signifies anything, it is that India continues to draw attention from non-Indians as strongly today as it has for centuries.

**Md Rezaul Haque**

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<sup>4</sup> Nehru 58.

## Marlena de Blasi, *Antonia and her Daughters* (Allen & Unwin, 2012)

*Antonia and her Daughters* is a true story, although the author has changed names and altered the location to another part of Tuscany in order to protect the family's privacy.

Marlena and her husband Fernando de Blasi have settled into their renovated sixteenth-century ballroom at 34 via del Duomo. Living for almost two years in a disruptive 'make-do' (7) fashion has left the author in a reflective mood. A writing deadline for her next book is looming, but she is restless and there is a tension between duty to her publisher and the distractions of life with Fernando. Marlena wants some time by herself fearing that having allowed Fernando to 'take a lead' (37) in so much of their life she is losing her hard-won sense of self.

The author decides to find a retreat that will be a place to think as well as write. A friend offers a small stone cottage set in the mountains in a remote area of western Tuscany, a location more 'Norway than Tuscany' (40). Fernando isn't happy about any separation arguing that in nine years of marriage they have 'never spent a night apart' (36). To which Marlena responds,

And during all the nights and days of those nine years we've pretty much mapped out our lives according to your needs ... for right now I have a need of my own. To stay apart for a time and work. Finish this book. I am not in revolt ... Just for a while, I want to stay alone in Biagio's little house in the woods. (36-37)

Installed in the cottage, Marlena quickly establishes a routine and work on her novel progresses well. Until a surprise invitation to Castelletto to dine with the de Gaspari women comprising Antonia, her daughters, granddaughters and a great granddaughter, in all seven tall, high-bottomed, blue-eyed, beautiful hellions. Marlena almost doesn't accept, but at the last moment decides to go. She has been curious about the 83-year-old Antonia ever since Biagio mentioned her at the time he offered the cottage. He also expressed a hope the two women would meet. Antonia's chilly greeting of 'Ah l'Americana' (58) when met in the village the previous day has further piqued that curiosity.

At the dinner, tensions mount as Antonia, well aware that Marlena is at the cottage to write, baits her with jibes about the plethora of books written by non-Italians about Italy and its food culture,. She follows up with further jibes in the hope she will upset the author and force her to leave. Wisely the author chooses not to become defensive.

Next morning Antonia arrives at the cottage before dawn, with a flask of coffee and a collection of wild onions in a bag 'for Carabaccio' (99). This delicious rustic Italian version of onion soup was on the previous evening's dinner menu. 'Make haste slowly. The light won't wait, you know' (128), Antonia urges. Marlena recognises an apology in this invitation to join in a ramble over the nearby hills foraging for the plentiful in-season wild onions, herbs and leaves. They talk as they walk and the author earns points for having her own knife and knowledge about gathering herbs. They stop their gleanings to watch the glorious sunrise and sip coffee 'no sugar' (128) as they rest. The friendship begun, it continues to develop as this shared pre-dawn ramble becomes the ritual start to each day.

Antonia is a very complex character with definite ideas and perceptions about modern Italy. She has plenty to say about the children of old families selling properties inherited from family lineages, sometimes of five or six generations, to 'ex-pats or tourists' (108).

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Underneath all the scorn and irony lies a fear of losing old ways, long-held rites and rituals, folklore, superstitions and beliefs.

‘Xenophobic’ (103) Antonia likens the tourist invasion to another occupation, that of the Germans in wartime Italy. It is for Germans she reserves her most pithy remarks. Clearly she is deeply scarred by her experiences during their wartime occupation, but refuses to expand on the matter when asked why. It’s not until Marlena’s time in the cottage is drawing to a close that Antonia breaks a self-imposed silence, revealing the shocking events that occurred and that continue to influence her present.

Antonia’s story is haunting and has been respectfully crafted in the retelling to reveal the amazing strength and resilience of this elderly, still beautiful woman. At the time of meeting the real Antonia the author was working on another novel, but gradually Antonia’s story captured a place in the author’s mind to become the next novel (326).

Marlena de Blasi’s passion for food is a frequent theme in her writing. It is certainly central in this book, as is another equally frequent theme, that of community. It is illustrated through the coming together of family members to prepare the simple ingredients from which a meal is to be made. It continues through the process of tasting and adding herbs or spices that turn these simple ingredients into a gourmet dish. It is during this process that conversation abounds and little secrets are revealed and food enters the sensual realm, making tastes buds tingle. The inclusion of key recipes at the close of the book continues the experience.

I don’t always like the inclusion of words in language other than English, particularly when it’s not the author’s first language. It can feel contrived. However, in the case of *Antonia and her Daughters*, the use of Italian words and phrases adds a touch of exotica. The author mentions, during an argument between herself and Fernando where they are using English, that it is ‘a rare occurrence between us’ (34). Perhaps it is because Italian has become her main language that it feels appropriate, rather than the self-conscious approach that can feel so deliberate. Of course Italian is a necessity for many of the specific ingredients and recipes.

A perceptive listener, the author crafts characters and their surroundings so well that they and their world are brought to life. The people of Castelletto remain in my mind even though the reading is over. I shall revisit them from time to time.

**Kay Hart**



**Paul D. Carter, *Eleven Seasons* (Allen & Unwin, 2012)**

*Here it comes. He's on his own, in space, ten metres from his opponent. He takes a bounce and roosts the ball into the vacant goal square. As it tumbles between the goalposts and over the railing on the other side he feels relieved, complete. It's the kick he spent all night thinking about. He's just as good in a real game as he is at recess, maybe stronger: inside the boundary line, the game is the only thing he has to think about. (20)*

In the dingy suburban Melbourne flat he shares with his mother, Jason Dalton spreads out his collection of Hawthorn football cards in a row on his bed, and he dreams.

Football is his passion, and his gift. Life only makes sense to Jason when he's out on the oval, Sherrin in hand; he has trouble focusing in school, and is intrigued by girls but doesn't know how to communicate with them. Most bewildering and hurtful to Jason is his mother's response to his love of football; she says that she wants to watch him play, but each Saturday morning he searches in vain for her face in the crowd. He knows how tired she is; he understands that she has to work long and irregular hours to support them both – his father is not in the picture – but he can't understand her seeming refusal to recognise or share in the thing that matters most to him. As he transforms from child to adolescent, Jason's hurt at his mother's attitude deepens into resentment, and meanwhile the other areas of his life are beginning to fray. The tragedy is that Jason thinks that he's doing OK for himself, but in reality he is emotionally immature, unable to comprehend or identify with the people in his ordinary life, and off the football field the only way he knows to respond is with anger and violence. Then his mother reveals a shocking truth to him that shatters his perception of the world of football for ever.

This concludes Part One of the novel, which follows Jason progressively through his teenage years. Part Two picks up the story two years later, during which Jason has been away both physically and emotionally; now he returns to Melbourne, to confront his old life in the hope of making a new one. The second half of Jason's narrative is much less clearly delineated than the first; it struggles for momentum at times, in a reflection of Jason himself as he tries to carve out a fresh existence while still grappling with the shadows of his past.

There's much to praise about Paul D. Carter's debut novel, which won the Vogel this year. Carter handles Jason's character compellingly against the nostalgic backdrop of 1980s Melbourne; his portrait of flawed manhood is sympathetic and heartfelt. Through Jason's experience, Carter dissects the Australian sporting dream aspired to by so many; he illustrates the darker side of football with episodes that reveal the underlying misogyny, brutality and violence. And yet, conversely, Carter demonstrates a real passion and nostalgia for the great Australian game of football. The messages conveyed in this novel are positive ones, and leave us feeling hopeful for Jason's future. Carter's writing style is reminiscent of Winton: clear, unadorned prose that is nevertheless rich in sentiment and pathos.

The only aspect of the novel I find problematic is the handling of the character of Jason's mother, Christine. Because she reveals so little of herself, even to her son, she comes across at times as detached and uncompromising, and correspondingly not always sympathetic or even likeable. As he grows up, Jason gleans small fragments of his mother's past life – mainly from rare, poignant moments of confidence between mother and son, when Christine lets her guard down enough to relate an old story or memory – but he cannot associate the bright and blithe girl of these anecdotes with his careworn mother, clad in faded

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jeans. In the second half of the book, she exists almost on the periphery, increasingly distanced from Jason as well as from the reader. While I understand the limitations of the narrative perspective – the story is, after all, told from Jason’s point of view – I found this to be an unsatisfying treatment of such a strong female individual, and felt that there was scope for further exploration of her character.

Ultimately, *Eleven Seasons* is a powerful coming-of-age tale, with a strong and convincing voice. It is also an authentic representation of masculinity as it is translated through the medium of Australian Rules football. The most significant testament to Carter’s talent and vision, however, is that he has addressed his subject matter in a way that will resonate with both men and women, football fans and football philistines – and with kids like Jason too.

**Kate Hayford**

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

***'Man of the House' and Other New Short Stories from Kenya* edited by Emma Dawson  
(Critical, Cultural and Communications Press, 2011)**

I first met Dr Emma Dawson at the Oxford Literary Festival in 2011 where she was on a panel discussing recent African literature. Intrigued by her work, I followed Emma to the School of Oriental and African Studies in London a few months later for the Royal African Society's event entitled "'Beyond the Postcolonial': new fiction from East and West Africa", where she and a selection of writers discussed and celebrated the launch of the various African anthologies that comprise the World Englishes Literature Fiction Series. Considering my Kenyan roots, I was especially drawn to the collection of Kenyan short stories, and, amidst fascinating writing from Cameroon, Nigeria and Uganda, it is this particular text that I will focus upon here.

Although the anthology prioritises the stories themselves, it also draws attention to the theory behind the 'new World Englishes fiction' (7) that it contains, and the editor's academic approach to the text is outlined in the introduction. Here, Dawson defines the term 'World Englishes Literature' (11) as writing produced from a country in which English acts as a second language, of which Kenya is an example.

The most prominent feature of Dawson's academic approach, however, is her emphasis on the distinction between World Englishes literature and native English-speaking countries, characterised as the West. She writes that 'World Englishes writers are less and less interested in their putative subalternity to a former colonial power', continuing on to say that 'World Englishes literature is not a synonym for postcolonial literature' (15). Indeed the anthology is unreservedly and excitedly driven by the ethos that 'World Englishes is (as it were) post-postcolonial', drawing on the fact that its contents 'includes a generation of writers' who no longer recall 'political independence' (15).

The anthology self-professedly moves forward from canonical postcolonial literature by writers such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o to locate itself in the here and now of Kenyan society, acting as a means by which new and 'often unknown' (8) writers are able to tell their own personal story. The separation of Kenya and the West is further strengthened by Dawson's editorial pursuit 'to listen' rather than 'to tell' (7), as her preface describes the journey to Kenya to collect submissions.

Including fifteen short stories, the anthology reflects a vibrant range of mouthpieces on Kenyan life today, written by authors of different professions, ages, sexes, and from different locations within the country itself. Beginning with 'Man of the House' – the short story which forms the title of the anthology – Stanley A. Gazemba's portrayal of Sadu's demise immediately subverts any trace of traditional patriarchal society, replacing it instead with a tragic yet biting real depiction of modern-day life in Nairobi's slums.

It is extremely refreshing to read this narrative of Kangemi – one of the many Kenyan slums often presented to us in the West as an alien landscape devoid of humanity – from the perspective of Gazemba's protagonist and local inhabitant, whose fight for survival is portrayed alongside turbulent matatu rides, 'drinks with the boys at the bridge-side *Senator den*' (28), and his relationship with the elusive Muthoni. Indeed it is these small details and intricacies of everyday life, woven around larger concepts of broken relationships, poverty, crime and illness, that impact the reader and bring so many of the stories to life. Munene Mwiindi's tale of sexual temptation and infidelity is centred around the commonplace need to

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charge a phone, whilst Muthoni Garland's opening description of Rebecca in 'Kissing Gordo' – as she sits pregnant and 'encased in a silver lacy dress', 'shovelling' in pizza at Nairobi West's Pizza Den (38, 39) – works to convey the feelings of disgust, bitterness and seduction that in turn illustrate the complexity of brotherly ties, love and living with HIV.

Despite contemporary Kenyan literature's theoretical departure away from issues of the postcolonial as expressed in the introduction to the text, the writing within the anthology is still heavily concerned with the political. Whilst only Lloyd Igane's 'Shaba Park' – which allegorises the history of Kenyan politics through its portrayal of the animals within the Magana Maara province – deals directly with neo-colonialism, numerous writers engage with the impact of the 2007 post-election violence on Kenyan society.

Alison O. Owuor's 'Screaming Thunder' movingly intertwines turbulent recollections of war with Laurence's life in Nairobi, fusing memories of past conflict with the 'battle lines' of the orange and blue parties during the elections (84), which, like the abortion clinic where he and Anna work, threatens to swamp the fragile flicker of life in the city. Kahuho Mureithi's 'Taking Care of Suzanna' and Simon Mbuthia's 'Days Long Gone' provide similar representations of the strains of ethnic division on familial relations, and Paul Mutuku's 'Innocent Guilt' poignantly recounts the difficulties of inner-city youths in abstaining from participating in the election violence.

Tragedy, however, is juxtaposed with comedy as many of the stories contain emphatic elements of humour. Shalini Gidoomal's 'Reality Cheque' uses the microcosm of a reality-television show to satirise elements of Kenyan society, bringing her fiction right up-to-date as she boldly makes light of current-affairs issues both within Kenya and on an international level. Her pervasive use of irony provides an engagingly effective reality-check on the absurd aspects of Nairobi life, wittily tackling inconstant politicians, inefficient workmanship and corrupt economies.

What is particularly resonant about this collection of short stories is the variety of voices presented within the text, not just in terms of each individual writer, but through the range of characters recounted within their pages. Rasna Warah beautifully and hilariously enunciates the various Nairobi-types gathered together at 'The Last Supper', whilst Suhaila Karim eloquently explores the social dislocation felt by her protagonist, an 'Arab-Kenyan', who counters the assumption that 'if you are not black, then you are not Kenyan' (193).

The anthology as a whole captures the fullness and diversity of Kenyan life, and the writers' varying use of language contributes to this richness. Dawson describes the encouragement given to 'language innovation and creativity' (21) within contemporary Kenyan writing, and the differing modes of speech employed by the authors affirm that Kenya has its own form of English, and not a singular one at that. The intermittent use of Swahili in Gazemba's dialogue is reminiscent of Nairobi's urban slang, Sheng, and forges a rhythm that echoes the city's pulsating backstreets; the colloquialisms present in Owuor and Suhaila's writing similarly serve to convey an absorbing aspect of their protagonists' subjectivity. Ultimately, the energetic range of pithy short stories within this anthology defies any effort of strict categorisation, reinforcing the exciting new avenues that contemporary Kenyan literature is taking.

**Rachel Knighton**

Michelle Cahill, *Vishvarupa* (Five Islands Press, 2011)

*Vishvarupa*

Sanskrit meaning: manifold, having all forms and colours.

*Vishvarupa* was the divine revelation of Krishna to Aravanan in the *Bhagavad Gita*.

(88)

Michelle Cahill's 2011 collection, *Vishvarupa*, establishes its scope prior even to the table of contents, with an acknowledgements page that spans thirty-six journals and magazines, eight different nations, and four separate continents. To this geographical diversity Cahill also brings a complex mixture of lenses – tourism, journalism, and migrancy, to name a few – through which the poems view various locales, cultures, and sub-cultures. Within this widely-travelled collection, however, is a striking capacity for focus expressed in poetry that establishes itself on the strengths of its images, stories, and reflections. And Cahill often brings these strengths to bear on the complex relationships of its speakers not only to the places and cultures in which they find themselves, but also to those speakers' interactions with their loved ones.

Given all this, *Vishvarupa* may sound a bit crowded. How does a poet make room for the disparate issues of so many locales and relationships in one collection? Although the poems do frequently trot the globe – from Mumbai to London to Darlington, etc. – the most important space of this collection is imaginative. In 'The Dream Aesthetic of War,' for example, Cahill skillfully manages one of the major problems of any poet who seeks to reconcile within her work the cataclysms of war with the quotidian experiences of traffic, work, and parenthood. And she does so by unfolding the poem in multiple layers of reflection. From a suburban setting the speaker twice folds onto the space other scenes, from Beirut and El Baddhawi, with the simple gesture of 'I think,' until the multiple spaces come to act upon the present moment:

These scenes replayed like a drama,  
a discourse, with its repetition  
of consumption, interrogation.  
We become agents of meaning  
with our fetish of balance sheets,  
transport, electronic mail. (60)

It is in a similar way that this variety can coexist in one book; *Vishvarupa*, though it is sometimes about this place or that place, is always about the speaker and his or her mind.

*Vishvarupa*, however, is not a book full of reflective abstractions. Cahill often brings a gritty bodily presence to poetry that is sometimes gruesome, sometimes technical (a medical perspective appears occasionally), and frequently erotic. These different presences overlap in powerful and beautiful ways, as in one poem, 'Agape,' in the series 'Six Myths of Love,' in which the speaker tells the story of a romantic affair in medical anatomical terms: 'Haunted by the heart's diction, I grew to love polysyllables like *myocardium*, *papillary*, *tricuspid*' (30). 'The Stinking Mantra,' one of the goriest and also most touching poems in the collection, involves both the speaker's young daughter and the rotting corpse of an electrocuted possum – and it evokes a striking *duende* in the mother-daughter relationship as

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the child rejects the pulsating, fetid and fecund corpse which the mother has adopted as a sort of sacred companion and confidant:

Soon her mouth began to fizz, filling with a residue  
creamy as boot polish and everything pregnant with heat.  
So the riddle of days, walking from doorstep to driveway  
then back to school. *Disgusting*, my daughter said.  
For at last the maggots came, teeming in the possum's  
stopped, burned mouth. The air smelt of stewed semen, (46)

Cahill's focus is as brutally and entrancingly unwavering when she attends to the parent-child relationship as it is when she attends to the decaying possum.

Not all of *Vishvarupa* is as weighted as the excerpt above, however. In 'Kali from Abroad,' Cahill's work is nimble as it shifts from traditional reference to pop reference:

Kali, you are the poster-goddess, sticking out your black  
tongue, like Gene Simmons from Kiss, a kick in the teeth,  
with your punk-blue leggings, your skull-and-scissor charms. (56)

More striking, the connection has a depth, as do the rest of Cahill's pop culture references. Never does the pop pale in comparison to the traditional or vice versa. Instead, each aspect tends to vivify and develop the other while, usually, at the same time bringing them into a sort of autobiographical discourse, as in 'Durga: a Self-Portrait,' when the speaker imagines herself as either 'Phoolan Devi or Buffy the Vampire Slayer' (58).

Although *Vishvarupa* is rich sonically, filled with gorgeous words, phrases, and sentences, it does not dazzle by means of technical feats of rhythm. And, for the most part, the sonic qualities are not of the type that makes a reader stop and attend to them. Rather, they form a textured soundscape as we focus on the stories, images, and juxtaposed references that take the main stage of this collection.

In *Vishvarupa*, Michelle Cahill skilfully manages to balance the almost unerringly vibrant elements. The effect, as expected, is striking. Leaping from one locale, mood, or relationship to the next, Cahill manages neither to fall flat nor to bewilder the reader. The poems provide enough information (especially when coupled with the notes, which define most of the Sanskrit words that appear in the collection) to open themselves up to a reader, but not so much as to appear over-determined. Regardless of whether a poem attends to family, war, or the quotidian, each one offers the reader something multivalent and richly coloured.

**Charles Manis**

**Heather Taylor Johnson, *Letters to my Lover from a Small Mountain Town* (Interactive Press, 2012).**

*Poetry*

*you move me to silence.  
I sit with you, mellowing  
to the outside world  
heeding my fluid inner.  
I wake with you, all day  
mine, others, friends, those dead  
all day you, and the rest is life.*

from 'Book Launch'(65)

In her second collection of poetry, *Letters to my Lover from a Small Mountain Town*, Heather Taylor Johnson writes of family life and love in a Rocky Mountains town. The poems spill over with a range of feelings - at times broody and emotional, at times elated and joyous, but always deeply wedded to a sense of place. Her first collection, *Exit Wounds*, was published by Picaro Press in 2007 and its broad subject matter was birth, death, and motherhood. This second collection, containing 48 poems, was published by Interactive Press in 2012. There are echoes of the earlier themes in *Letters to my Lover...* but its focus is *living* in connection with *place*; of experiencing all that a particular place in the world has to offer, through the prism of family life, love and emotion.

Taylor Johnson was born in the United States and moved to Australia in 1999. She resides in Adelaide, holds a PhD in creative writing from The University of Adelaide, and is the poetry editor for *Wet Ink*. In 2010 she moved back to the United States to spend a year living in the Colorado Rockies with her family, and it was here that her new collection was born.

*Letters to my Lover* begins with a short and reverent poem to the town of Salida

*You have always been –  
when the sun rose  
as the trout swam  
before the Rockies had a name.  
This mountain town makes us ancient.  
We have always been. (3)*

It is a poem that expresses the desire to (re)connect with something ancient, pure and timeless, and sets the scene for the poems that follow. There is a sense in which the act of moving to this mountain town represents a wish to fully embrace life, nature and the elements, to meld with an undefined essential 'esprit', to renew the creative spirit.

Two distinct settings recur throughout the collection – that of cosy domesticity, around the wood stove with a pot of beans or soup simmering on the stovetop; and being in the marvellous outdoors, with the snow, the wind, the mountains, or sunflowers beside the road. Underpinning everything is love – love of place, love of nature, love of family and hearty food, and the intimacy between two lovers.

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because after the mountains  
my eyes found yours  
and then we gasped  
forgetting to breath (*sic*)  
forgetting the snow  
forgetting even  
the mountains. (4-5)

In my view, it is a very feminine and fecund collection – an impression created, perhaps, by poems that feature topics such as menstruation and the desire for a baby. The poem ‘Wild’ expresses joy at encountering sunflowers along the roadside during a bike ride. Joy is a counterpoint to the heavy and unfathomable tearfulness experienced during menstruation, and the poem concludes with an image of harmony and celebration.

I had been crying –  
something idle however pivotal,  
and bleeding – so make of it what you will.  
a woman menstruating at summer’s end  
storm clouds, the mountains: something lonely  
however connected.

...

and then the sunflowers!  
in the breeze they nodded, chanting *we are*  
*we are*, and how they bled their colours  
into mine! (7)

Throughout the collection there are undertones of an impending death held at bay. Perhaps an illness that threatens to spoil complete happiness. Maybe it is the line ‘cancer changes everything’, in the poem ‘Bearable’, that implies this; or the dead and eyeless deer passed during a bike ride.

I smelt them.  
they caught in my throat;  
and the deer I rode past  
had no eyes, smelt much worse  
than fresh dung fertilised  
by an early morning rain. (27)

Taylor Johnson writes honest poems that avoid becoming too sentimental, while recognising tensions and refusing to neatly resolve them, as in this poem ‘We are all consonants’.

There were knots we sometimes caught  
and chose to leave in tangles  
but we were ultimately untanglers,

substantially emotive,  
women with reason for tears. (8)

Every now and then there is a backward glance to Australia – ‘Australia’s first female / prime minister’ and ‘the distant South Australian sea’. There is no evident yearning to return to Australia; the lovers are happy in their small mountain town and there is pride in being a hybrid and an ex-pat.

Without you there would be no ex-pat.  
Without me no working visa.  
We inhabit this earth as if it were our own. (45)

**Deb Matthews-Zott**

**Anselme Ricard, *Lettres d'Australie* edited by Peter Hambly (Ancora Press, 2010)**

If you like reading original historical accounts about what it was like to live in the second half of the nineteenth century in the Australian colonies from a Frenchman's perspective, then you will be thoroughly rewarded by this short collection of letters written in French by Anselme Ricard for the Parisian daily paper *La Presse*, and carefully edited by French scholar Peter Hambly.

Anselme Ricard arrived in Australia in 1853, aged 29, and his correspondence for the Parisian daily newspaper extends to 1856. Originally trained in literary studies, he is better remembered in Australia for his brief teaching career as one of the first Readers appointed at the newly established University of Sydney in the French language programme (1853-1855).<sup>1</sup> Due to the uncertainty of a long-term position there, he resigned and returned to France in 1856 to pursue his literary interests, and resumed a writing career in Prague, New York, and Philadelphia where he eventually died in 1922. This propensity to move across continents suggests an adventurous spirit that propelled Ricard to explore horizons beyond his native provincial town of Roquemaure in Southern France. The interest of his *Lettres d'Australie* thus resides in offering the French reader an outsider's perspective, as when one is writing from beyond one's borders. Hence the title of the series *Xenographia: Writers and readers from Elsewhere* chosen by the publishers of this series at Monash University.

It seems that throughout these letters, which incidentally took three months to reach France – we are told that 64 days was then a record time to cover the distance between the two countries by steamer – Anselme Ricard was most impressed by the success of the English to transform this vast land into a prosperous colonial outpost for the British settlers and other emigrants. This can be gathered from the comment he makes about the 'laziness' of the Spanish conquerors to make anything of their newly acquired territory in South America (31), and from the regret he expresses about the slow establishment of New Caledonia as a French colony by comparison. According to him, the French could have followed the example of the enterprising English who provided all kinds of administrative incentives to settle and develop the land there.

Besides the industrious nature of the British settlers, the gold rush in Victoria clearly made an impression on Ricard as it played a pivotal role in attracting a variety of other migrants, mostly unskilled labourers from Europe and China, who were given a chance to 'have a go', whether they struck it lucky or simply settled and worked on the land. To prove this point, Ricard gives abundant details of the economic prosperity that fuelled the emerging rivalry between the two burgeoning metropolis of Melbourne and Sydney (63). We are informed, for instance, that importations of manufactured goods were at times glutting the Australian market and the fluctuations of exports (mainly gold, cattle, wool and grease) threatened the economic equilibrium of the developing nation. And then, as his prose becomes a little overburdened with figures, Ricard enlivens his listings of commercial transactions with reports on a number of criminal incidents that peppered the life of the settlers, or anecdotes such as how Tasmania got its name.

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Kerr, 'Four Early French Teachers at the University of Sydney', in *Journal of the Sydney University* (2012) 39. Web. ojs-prod.library.usyd.edu.au



Ricard's letters are nonetheless revealing of the settlers' everyday social customs. We learn precisely the quantity of drapes, jewellery, perfumes, furniture, shoes, tea, wine, that were imported; the quantity of liquors and other consumables ingested per head of population (e.g. 25 litres of spirit per year [15]); the wages of each corporation, labourers and servants (27-28). These meticulously itemised 'facts' may have been prompted by a desire to adopt the journalistic imperative of reporting exact information, 'J'obéis à mon devoir de correspondant exact'<sup>2</sup> (52), however, the lack of consistency in the currency used for reporting these, which are sometimes given in pound sterling and other times in French francs, makes it difficult for the reader to gain an objective view, and we must rely on Ricard's assessment that, for instance, the amount of money which was allocated per year for migrants from the British Isles was very generous.

Ricard also fails to maintain the required impartiality of journalism, and his critical stance may be skewed as his reflections are simply representing the opinions of his contemporaries and ideology of the colonial era. In fact, Ricard makes an apology for colonialism, where the natives are simply brushed aside and deemed unintelligent:

... ce sol foulé il y a soixante ans, par la race stupide des aborigènes, est aujourd'hui la propriété d'une race civilisée, conquérante, avide de butin et de bien-être, qui marche hardiment de front vers la plus belle conquête que l'histoire mentionne, la conquête pacifique des Océans par son industrie et son activité.<sup>3</sup> (18).

This would appear unenlightened and offensively ethnocentric today, although, to his credit, he does not go as far as condoning violent and unfair treatment of the natives: 'On a assez abusé de ces naturels, il est temps de venger l'humanité'<sup>4</sup> (36).

On the subject of artistic and literary pursuits in the colonies, Ricard deplores the fact that the theatre in particular, a sign of a great civilised society according to him, is not well supported or encouraged. Once again readers are given an accumulation of factual information (48) and also, at times, contradicting statements. On page 41, for example, he writes the theatre is expensive, but later he claims that only the popular classes are interested in the theatre, which does not encourage the pursuit of high standards (64-65)! According to him, charity balls and showing off one's attire provide sufficient entertainment for the well-to-do settlers. The laborious classes drink too much and get into strife. This reader suspects that a more nuanced approach might give more credibility to these accounts.

With regard to the bi-lateral relations between France and the Australian colonies, which runs as a thematic thread throughout these letters, the author sees them based on an *entente cordiale*, as demonstrated by charity balls organised in support of the French soldiers engaged in the Crimean war, for instance. Ricard also insists on the advantages that the English could gain from drawing on a greater number of migrants. The French could bring their technical savoir-faire in extracting the minerals, in agriculture, the care of vineyards, and the processing of olive oil. He therefore urges French readers to consider migrating to Australia and take advantage of these opportunities (48), although in his first letter in which

<sup>2</sup> 'I dutifully fulfill my task as exact correspondent'. (This and the following translations are mine).

<sup>3</sup> '...this land, trodden upon sixty years ago by the stupid race of Aborigines, is today owned by a civilised, conquering race, eager to enjoy the spoils and the comfort, as it bravely heads on the most beautiful conquest mentioned in history, the peaceful conquest of the Oceans through its industrious activity'.

<sup>4</sup> 'One has sufficiently taken advantage of these natives, now it is time to avenge humanity'.

he shows his attachment to France he does not see it as such a good idea: 'Toutefois, je ne conseillerais pas aux cultivateurs français de venir en Australie ... quand nous avons la France où il y a tant à faire'<sup>5</sup> (6). He however deplores that due to this *entente cordiale* not more is done to encourage French settlers who reside in Australia to expand in New Caledonia which is situated only a short distance away from Sydney.

This edition by Peter Hambly is well presented with complementary annotations that bring up to date information on the historical significance of these figures named by Ricard, both on the French and the Australian sides. It would have been helpful to have a closing remarks section perhaps on the significance of these letters, as the collection seems to end abruptly. One is left wondering how these letters influenced the French at the time? Was there any follow-up? However, it is enjoyable to read, with critical hindsight, these fascinating observations, as they offer a record of life in the Australian colonies from June 1853 to January 1856 while reflecting the impressions of an educated Frenchman who witnessed it all from his perspective as an outsider.

**Colette Mrowa-Hopkins**

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<sup>5</sup> 'However, I would not advise our French growers to come to Australia ... when we have France where there is so much to do'.

***Southern Sun, Aegean Light: Poetry of Second-Generation Greek-Australians* edited by N. N. Trakakis (Arcadia 2011)**

The receipt of the book of poetry, *Southern Sun, Aegean Light*, for review, coincided with my attendance at some sessions of the Antipodes Writers Festival held on 15-17 June 2012 at the Wheeler Centre in Melbourne. Here some of the poets featured in this publication read their work and participated in panel discussions on the creative process. As this was the first such literary festival focusing on the work of Greek-Australians, the organisers celebrated the opportunity to publicise their work in a mainstream context and to collate the immigration history of the Greek Orthodox Community in Australia.

Trakakis has drawn together the poems of thirty-five second-generation Greek-Australian poets and claims that 'many poems from this younger generation who are producing innovative and insightful work are not receiving the exposure and recognition that their work deserves' (xiii).

I do not agree with this view given that some of the contributors, such as Angela Costi, Tom Petsinis, Peter Lyssiotis, Tina Giannoukos, Komninos Zervos and Rachael Petridis, are recognised in the general arts and literary community through mainstream publication and performance. Most of the contributors are tertiary qualified and involved in professional, artistic and literary activities beyond the confines of the Greek community. This is pleasing. The challenge facing the so-called 'ethnic poet' is to break out of the shackles of this potentially confining descriptor as it can perpetuate stereotypic nuances of Greek identity and culture focusing on the unskilled immigrant worker. Komninos Zervos, in his poem, *Nobody Calls Me a Wog, Anymore*, penned in 1990, alludes to this descriptor:

nobody calls me a wog anymore  
i'm respected as an australian  
an australian writer  
a poet....

hey, Australia  
i like you lots  
since you stopped calling me  
'me wog mate kevin'  
and started calling me  
'the australian poet, komninos!' (304-306)

In another poem *Kastellorizo*, Komninos, pays tribute to the island where his parents were born and adds:

my family came, the cazzies came, from kastellorizo  
been living in, a time-warp zone, for eighty years or so. (309-310)

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The poems of Petsinis from *My Father's Tools*<sup>1</sup> move us beyond the time-warp of generational history by reflecting on the tools and lovingly linking memories and tributes to the current generation, such as in *Pencil*:

Working, you wore it behind your ear  
That always blazed crimson with sunset.  
A man's best friend, you instructed,  
It marks and remembers, keep it near.

A lifetime later I heed your advice  
And start sketching the first draft of this. (258)

Trakakis points out that he has assembled the contributions in alphabetical order and has not identified the underlying thematic threads that inform the poetic voices in the collection. He does, however, introduce each poet with a biography as well as notes and translations, where necessary, in the body, not the end of the collection. I found this presentation particularly helpful in identifying the diversity of influences that shape the work of these poets. The poems are primarily written in English with some contributions in Greek, such as the poems of Dean Kalimniou, or a mixture of both languages, illustrated in the poems of Vicky Tsaconas. The poetic styles are varied, ranging from free verse to sonnets. Given the number of contributors to this collection I have chosen to focus on some of the underlying themes reflected in the poems rather than endeavour to review the merits or otherwise of particular poets.

I recall reading an interview with Adrienne Rich in which she described poetry as reflecting how we connect with and define the world and how we want to be connected to it. Reading the work of the poets in this collection illustrates her view. There are common threads of experience which the poets draw on. Some describe the accounts of villagers reminiscing about their hardships. In *Dimitri of Avariko*, Rachael Petridis observes:

The village is empty.  
Here where the sun is high  
and the father raised nine children,  
old men sit, fingers click  
and re-click their komboloia,  
beads of lapis, beads of ochre  
the beat of memories that slide. (245)

Trakakis and M.G. Michael draw on their spiritual beliefs. Other poets explore their existential experience when visiting ancient historic sites and refer to the rich classic and contemporary history of Greek poetry. Strangers as well as kin of the overseas born visitor are intrigued and inquisitive about their claim to a Greek identity, as depicted by Melissa Petrakis in *At the Lingerie Shop, Kozani*:

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<sup>1</sup> See my review of Tom Petsinis, *My Father's Tools*, *Cordite Poetry Review* (online) 15 November 2010.

Despite tradition and expectations  
I come to Greece  
bearing no gifts  
offering only myself,  
my willingness to be open to things,  
and my stories  
my experiences and dreams  
so green on the vine compared to those of this country.

....  
At the lingerie shop  
the women want to give me some token  
they want to be hospitable to this girl  
despite her lack of language and her awkwardness,  
yet I am cup-size-too-large for the delicate pieces  
am a woman Melbourne greek  
a time-capsule locked 1950s fleshy greek  
living nostalgia. (239)

Another predominant theme relates to the second-generation poet, born in Australia, reflecting on family experiences as a child of immigrants and establishing familial and cultural links with Greece. For example the poems of Helena Spyrou reflect generational ties maintained across the globe and observe human exploitation. In *Syntagma Square, Athens 1991*, she writes:

The ambulance sounds its siren  
but the din of the city deafens it.  
Stuck in Syntagma traffic  
the driver decides to wheel  
my Theia Anthi along the footpath  
for the two remaining blocks to the clinic  
and I walk alongside her  
holding an umbrella over her head. (277)

In Australia Spyrou works for the Textile Clothing and Footware Union and in *Human Cargo* observes the plight of foreign domestics in Greece:

Hired by the new bourgeoisie, it's clear  
you're the domestic slave with no wages in hand.  
For the privilege, you pay.

The ladies in Greece brag about their girl from Albania  
but you avert your gaze, the only way to withstand  
knowing, your baby will grow away from here. (275).

Some poets relate to three ethnicities. Georgina 'Little G' Chrisanthopoulos is a Greek—

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Aboriginal writer and performer. Luka Haralampou is of Greek heritage, born in Brisbane, and an Assistant Lecturer at the Centre for Australian Indigenous Studies at Monash University. In his poem, *History Books*, he asserts:

No man is better than any other man or more advanced!  
Look what we've done to this place and tell me we are more advanced...  
No we're not we were wrong, say it again;  
No we're not we were wrong!  
That's the sound of change my friends  
...  
You think they're going to come to class and listen to shit?  
Shit you better listen to this  
Because poetry is the only place a real education can still exist! (151 & 152)

Luka's poems raise consciousness and confront what he regards to be the political hypocrisies of his grandparents' generation. Katerina Cosgrove has a Greek-Irish-Australian heritage: she is a traveller who delves into the historical tragedies of Turkey, Syria and Armenia. Her poem *How Long Have I Known You?* addresses a 1915 sepia photograph of an Armenian child:

How long have I known you?  
I stare at your image and trace lines  
of mouth, cheek, round Armenian chin  
with my bitten nail.

How you stand, one hand on hip, holding a clay jug with the other.  
He must have posed you like this, the Turk  
who became your owner. (44)

*Southern Sun, Aegean Light* illustrates the universality of the poetic endeavour and the broadening diversity of the writing of second-generation Greek-Australian poets. The challenge is to evaluate whether ethnic-specific events, such as the recent Antipodes Writers Festival and ethnic-specific publications, such as *Southern Sun, Aegean Light*, liberate the poet from or entrap the poet in their ethnic identity.

**Loula S. Rodopoulos**

***The Word: Two Hundred Years of Polish Poetry* translated by Marcel Weyland (Brandl & Schlesinger, 2010)**

In his preface to this 478-page volume of translations of the work of Polish poets, Marcel Weyland writes that translation originated as a hobby and subsequently became an obsession for him. His selected poems have been translated from Polish into English under eleven thematic headings including, Poetry, Love, Death, War, Holocaust, Nature, God, Exile and Emigration. Individual poets are included under a range of headings. Weyland writes that his selection of poems was guided by three criteria. He prefers the short poem, which 'can have the immediate impact of a gunshot' (18). He has chosen poems that gave him pleasure in childhood, and those, which he best describes as iconic, with a preference for the traditional rhymed verse (19).

A short historical perspective follows this preface highlighting his view that 'World War II proved disastrous for Polish poetry' (23), in that many talented poets perished through war-related death and suicide, and it also created a rift between those poets who chose to stay 'in the country and experienced both the war and the post-war communist regimes, and the significant émigré poets who went into exile in the West' (23). He discusses numerous poets, including Zbigniew Herbert, who refused to compromise with the Soviet regime. Others, such as Konstanty Ildefons Gałczyński, who collaborated with the Communist regime, were frequently silenced. A comprehensive appendix about the authors is contained at the end of the book with additional notes about their personal and political background and fate. The material serves the interested student of Polish poetry well. No doubt only those fluent in both languages can evaluate the efficacy of the translations. Given the word limitations of book reviews I have chosen to delve into some of the poems that have moved me.

The opening section of this collection is entitled Poetry. One poem, *Seeds*, written by Tomasz Jastrun, perhaps shaped Weyland's preference for short poems. Jastrun writes:

I do not like long poems  
 A short poem is like a pebble  
 it can be flung or  
 be tossed like a ball  
 or swallowed before bedtime  
 ...  
 longer poems are impracticable these days  
 one must concentrate on them  
 in the unceasing gabble of happenings  
  
 the short verse is the symbol of our era  
 the seed which waits its own appointed time (41)

This poem was written in 1950: one could debate whether Jastrun's view is valid today. And just what constitutes a short poem is puzzling, as the collection consists of poems of various lengths. Of greater significance are the concluding lines of *Seeds*, which suggest that the poetic meaning or rather the interpretation of poetic meaning may take time to evolve for a

reader, depending upon the historical era and individual personal circumstance and political ideology.

Those who lived through the war, holocaust, exile and emigration, the subject matter of a substantial number of poems included in this collection, will comprehend and relate to the poems in different ways. In the section on War, *Warsaw Carol*, written in 1939 by Stanisław Baliński pleads:

Mother, postpone the birth of Your Son,  
some other time's best,  
Let not the eyes of Creation look on  
how we're oppressed.

Elsewhere Your Son should with all due gladness  
be given birth,  
not now, not here, not in this saddest  
of towns on earth. (187)

In the section on Holocaust, Władysław Broniewski's poem *To The Jews Of Poland* voices his outrage:

From Polish township and village no cry of despair is sent ...  
they fell as a troop in battle, the Warsaw Ghetto's brave fighters,  
I dip my words in hot blood, my heart in tremendous lament  
for you O Jews of Poland, I, Polish wanderer – writer. (259)

The last line of the first verse of the poem, dedicated to a Polish Jewish Socialist leader, Szmul Zygielbaum, who according to the notes, escaped to Britain as a member of the Polish Government in Exile in London, hints at the guilt felt by those in exile fighting to save their compatriots from annihilation in the homeland. Zygielbaum suicided in protest at the British Government's disregard of the plight of the Polish Jews (478). In his book titled *The Writer as Migrant* (perhaps more aptly titled as *The Writer in Exile*) Ha Jin, in the chapter on 'The Language of Betrayal', cites the case, amongst others, of Joseph Conrad's emigration from Poland. Ha Jin suggests that such writers/poets were spurned, seen to have betrayed their native country in pursuit of their creativity in the English language and deriving their income in a foreign country.<sup>1</sup> This collection lends itself to such debates, as in a later chapter Ha Jin refers to the ideal situation of the bilingual poet Czesław Miłosz who taught his native language at Berkley as well as writing in both Polish and English.

In his section on Death, Weyland includes a poem by Miłosz, *Sense*, that opens with a verse, perhaps a rejoinder to critics of writers in exile:

– When I die, I'll see the world's lining.  
The other side, past bird, past mountain, and past sunset.  
Inviting recognition of the true meaning.

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<sup>1</sup> Ha Jin, *The Writer as Migrant* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008) 37, 79.

What did not agree, shall then agree.  
What was not understood shall be understood. (169)

Marcel Weyland is recognised for his services to the Polish community in Australia and internationally known for his contributions to Polish literature. Perhaps the hobby that became his obsession has overwhelmed this collection with the number of poems, poets and themes he has covered. The juxtaposition of poems with political nuances that challenge the reader to learn more about the history of Poland is somewhat incongruous alongside sections of Verses for Children, Ballads and Epigrams. Perhaps greater selectivity of poems, poets and themes would have resulted in a more accessible volume. Nevertheless *The Word* offers a rich resource for both the scholar and general reader of poetry.

**Loula S. Rodopoulos**

**Carla Guelfenbein, *The Rest is Silence*, translated from the Spanish by Katherine Silver (Portobello Books, 2011)**

*The Rest is Silence* haunts. ‘Do you remember?’ says Juan, in the last speech act. When all is said and done it is memories shared that create the bond. I close the book. The characters are silent. But my thoughts don’t rest there, caged within the covers. The book is infinitely sad but there is reconciliation. Salvation lies in trust and being there for the other.

The narrative trope of *The Rest is Silence* is a death-spiral – metonymically attached to the exploration of marriage breakdown – family matters. Juan is a heart surgeon but he can’t talk to his second wife (Alma) or his son by his first wife (Soledad), even though he loves them both. He is riven with unreconciled anger and guilt, fed by recollections of the past. He hides in his demanding professional work and escapes above the ordinary world in his light aircraft: ‘From up here, everything becomes insignificant ... Altitude – like the passage of time – emphasizes the most pleasant parts of life’ (17). Alma is devastated by her husband’s withdrawal – innocent of wrong-doing – bereft, wondering about a future without passion or intimacy. She turns for comfort to an old flame. Twelve-year-old Tommy is the third in the middle, the lynchpin of the narrative. He knows from the outset that ‘sometimes words are like arrows. They fly back and forth, wounding and killing, just like wars’ (3). But the silences are the scary part. Papa’s silences are black and oppressive, forcing people into solitary corners. White silences let in the light – liberate. Tommy invents an imaginary mentor called Kájef and makes up stories about his mama, to remember her by. But unlike his father Tommy is determined to face up to present realities. He has come to love his stepmother and young step-sister (Lola) and would ‘do anything to make it so Alma doesn’t leave us’ (195). Tommy is fascinated by the myth of the labyrinth in which Theseus conquers and kills the Minotaur. Ariadne’s thread is the line through his drawing: ‘the thread that leads love out’ (111).

Carla Guelfenbein says that her narratives begin with the appearance of a character, one who might very well pass in a crowd but suddenly catches her eye and connects.<sup>1</sup> *The Rest is Silence* had its inception in an image of a small boy under the table with a recording device. Guelfenbein says that she was moved by his separation from the other children and his aura of solitariness. This mystery child was the basis for the character of Tommy and the back-story of a boy who grows up isolated from other children because of a heart condition. Soon after Alma comes to stay she gives Tommy a tape recorder and shows him how to use sounds to make his own music. Tommy, however, is more interested in decoding words. He tapes conversations and tells his father that he doesn’t eavesdrop to make mischief but ‘to find the invisible order of things – evidence. “I don’t only tape other people,” he said. “I also tape my own voice, ideas and things. When I say them out loud, I know they exist”’ (223).

Guelfenbein creates a precocious creature of light. Tommy is insatiably curious about the wonders of the universe and the capacity of both science and language ‘to express and understand things that otherwise would be impossible’ (158). Half vulnerable child and the rest stoic sage he embarks on the classic coming-of-age quest – *Bildungsroman*. The trope is a ‘novel of formation’ which usually involves a spiritual crisis and the passage from childhood to maturity, in which the protagonist seeks knowledge of his/her identity and place

<sup>1</sup> Interview with Carla Guelfenbein, posted by Lucy Popescue on June 19, 2011. Available: [lucypopescu.wordpress.com/2011/06/19/interview-carla-guelfenbein/](http://lucypopescu.wordpress.com/2011/06/19/interview-carla-guelfenbein/)



in the worldly order. Tommy's crisis is precipitated by the lies and secrets surrounding his mother's death and an innate feeling for social justice. He believes in archetypal battles. Eros and Thanatos are personified and 'Good will always triumph over Evil' (14). He visits Aunt Corina and gives her a drawing of 'a man whose body is made of stars', flying through the universe, his elements '*formed in the heat of the explosion of a star*' (125). She tells him that it is beautiful.

Tommy's drawings are symbolic, significant in any interpretation of his actions. He would have liked to tell Papa his worries 'but the words are trapped inside me, like the birds inside Grandpa's aviary' (76). His father has become a stranger, an imposter sent by enemy forces, to be resisted. Tommy makes a picture for Grandpa – a man, a child, a cage, a ship faraway on the horizon (for escape) and the caption 'Hi I love you' – which he throws out of the car window after the debacle at the birthday party when he provokes the old patriarch. But he can't hate his father like he wants to (195). Guelfenbein includes facsimiles as part of the narrative – drawings, emails, pages of notebooks – to give insight into the mythic dimensions of Tommy's world and the clarity of his judgments.

Culture and artifacts connect people; expressions of meaning and intentionality beyond words, through encoded and shared understanding. Tommy makes a kaleidoscope decorated with two figures embracing as a gift for Mr Milowsky who is Jewish and knew his mama when she was incarcerated at Aguas Claras. Mrs Milowsky befriended Soledad and always put fresh flowers on her shrine at the roadside. Mr Milowsky explains the significance of religious rituals – the *Shabbat* blessing. Tommy also makes use of sign-language for private conversations with Alma. She taught him the rudiments, although this form of communication loses something of its exclusive power when Lola learns to use it too. And at school, Tommy discovers the psychic range of poetic language to build empathic bridges between people: 'there could be a place, deep down inside our bodies, where we were all the same. Because otherwise, how would it be possible for Mr. Huidoboro [a poet], who died sixty years ago, to talk about what's going on inside me?' (158). Tommy comes to appreciate that the way words are packaged gives shape to the overwhelming chaos of thought and imagination – communicates the certainty of collective control and binding across an incommensurable void. Later Juan hacks into Tommy's computer files and is frightened by the evidence of his son's research – edited sound files of salient conversations and the Letterbox which captures the hate mail. Aunt Corina's indictment '*Those sonsabitches*' strikes a raw nerve. Juan is shamed by Tommy's courage in dealing with the issues on his own: 'Tommy has been living with this knowledge, this anguish all these weeks ... the only thing I want to do is hug my son' (231).

*The Rest is Silence* is not a monological tract but a composite of perspectives. Guelfenbein suggests that there cannot be a one-eyed truth.<sup>2</sup> The duty of a writer is to run away from preconceptions and commonplace expectations. She says that it is satisfying to write from different points of view – heart surgeon, second wife, son by a previous marriage – allowing the characters to speak in counterpoint. The author suggests that her work is strongly influenced by 'stream of consciousness' techniques – Virginia Woolf and the Brazilian writer, Clarice Lispector. However, Guelfenbein says that perhaps the best Latin American writer is Roberto Bolaño who died in 1977. Reading his work is like being shown a piece of fabric and coming into awareness of a secret subtext. Life and art converge with

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<sup>2</sup> Guelfenbein in the interview posted by Popescu, 2011.

visceral realism and reactive intensity, political because the work raises consciousness of what it means to be human. Tommy tells his science teacher: ‘when I find out about something, I can’t pretend it doesn’t exist and that this is called “raising my consciousness”’ (165). Guelfenbein believes that a writer should capture the world through the eyes of personal experience, self-conscious reflection and critique, weaving a veil to capture the many motes of consciousness trapped in the light.<sup>3</sup>

Guelfenbein excels in crafting interior monologues. Present events are intercut with surreal dreams and flashbacks which reveal psychic clues to character and motivations. Tommy, Juan and Alma all come alive in the flow of their reveries. The chapters alternate, well-signposted by iconic naming. Juan’s sign is an hourglass because somehow time is running out on fragile realities and he is impotent in the face of events. He dreams that he falls overboard from a ship carrying both Alma and Soledad (whose name means ‘solitude’ or ‘outcast’) who move further and further away from him. Alma’s sign is two wavelets because she imagines herself as a fish, living in a house of water, protected from human frailties – her mother’s embarrassing promiscuity, in particular – by the vast distances of the ocean. Tommy’s sign is a warrior’s arrow, representing rising manhood – ‘spunk’ says Juan (17) – or in testimony to his growing facility to use words as weapons, to ‘express and understand the things that otherwise would be impossible’ (158).

*The Rest is Silence* is a transnational project – Spanish to English. Katherine Silver is an experienced translator. She is co-director of the Banff International Literary Translation Centre in Canada, although she lives in California. Her most recent translations from the Spanish are works by César Aira, Horacio Castellanos and Daniel Sada – all very different in writing style. Silver says (in an online interview with Barbara Altmann) that there is no living to be made out of translation – unless it is associated with what turns out to be a best-seller – however, translation studies are making their way into universities, attracting academic interest for what is a complex literary task.<sup>4</sup>

Silver suggests that cultural sensitivity is what makes a translation work. Research is important because cultural stereotypes and commonplaces won’t do. Her task is to stretch English to cover the original text – not simply a question of word for word correspondence. A good translation invokes metonymic associations rather than the equivalence of metaphors, thus opening ‘a way for cultures to expand outwards.’<sup>5</sup> Silver wants to know if the wherewithal can be found in English to do what the author does in Spanish. The creative challenge is to bring the work alive in a new landscape. The reader must be transported beyond the words to connect with the underlying human experience. Something new comes into being which bridges cultures.

*The Rest is Silence* is meticulously crafted, capturing the frozen moments of a nightmare descent on a path with no return. There were markers – dreams and portents – and ‘occurrences’ which demanded auguries rather than closed silences. The book cover is a greyscale picture of a grave, dark-eyed boy – sensitive mouth, enigmatic presence. A fantasy flight of exotic coloured birds hover in the foreground. Alma observes: ‘He’s been watching me the whole time with his pale, whimsical face’ (110). Tommy’s presence mediates the action. Juan says: ‘suddenly, a question pops into my head that makes me tremble: Why did

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<sup>3</sup> Guelfenbein to Popescu, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Katherine Silver, ‘UO Today #49: Katherine Silver with Barbara Altmann’, Oregon Humanities Center: [uoregon.edu](http://uoregon.edu)

<sup>5</sup> Katherine Silver, ‘UO Today #49: Katherine Silver with Barbara Altmann’

you let the birds go? It's never occurred to me that Tommy had a reason to do what he did. I should have asked him. I should have listened to what he had to tell me' (252). Would the right word of intervention at the right time have made a difference? Was Tommy's action the heedless irresponsibility of a child or a reasoned gesture of defiance against authority, in an event which marks his individuation from the father's house? Sometimes the fine network of invisible supports set in place by parents for their young as they fly the nest is no proof against happenstance.

Guelfenbein weaves a veil to catch the motes of consciousness. Events are dramatic, stylised in conversational dialogues and acted out through interior monologues which climax in moments of poetic realisation. The deft use of language is disciplined to a purpose and gripping. Characters are brought to the edge of the sublime. Juan in fear, Alma in guilt and Tommy ... Tommy is a bright star that streaks the night sky. Tommy's existential well-being rests on the psychic and physical connection with his mother and the reinstatement of her symbolic value, a pilgrimage he feels compelled to take alone: 'I don't know if you realize this, but I got here all by myself. I think I grew a few inches on the way, because I feel taller' (214). The work moves – deft with sorrow and understanding for the pity of it all.

Guelfenbein declares that she began writing short stories as a young girl and that writing is her only steady love. Her debut novel, *El revés del alma* (in English, *The other side of the soul*, 2003) is semi-autobiographical, about an exiled artist who returns to a post-Pinochet Chile from London and can only feel his estrangement. Her second work, *The Women of My Life* (to name it in English), is a best seller in Chile and has been translated into twelve other languages. *The Rest is Silence* is Guelfenbein's third novel but the first to be translated into English. Her next book – to be published simultaneously in Latin America, Spain, Germany and France – is called *Naked Swimmers*. Why not another translation into English?

### Christine Runnel

***Your Essence, Martyr: Pakistani Elegies* edited by Alamgir Hashmi (Plainview Imprint, 2011)**

To read *Your Essence, Martyr* means to enter a world of lamentation, where words, like tears, seem to trickle through the pen from the wounded hearts of the poets. In spite of having a complex relationship with Pakistan as a Bangladeshi (Bangladesh got independence from it in 1971), I am deeply saddened hearing 'the heart's cry' (3) of the people of Pakistan during 1970s. It is surely a bold attempt of Professor Alamgir Hashmi, a renowned scholar, essayist, critic and poet in Postcolonial Studies, to gather the English translation of the seventy Urdu poems of 'samizdat existence' (3) for the first time in a collection thirty-two years after their composition. It not only will bring the readers in touch with the poems of peerless beauty, but make them aware of the turmoil-torn history of Pakistan during that decade as well. Though the book is plainly covered in white with a scarlet title, it becomes the voice of the suppressed, raised and heard from any nation at any time under unconstitutional Martial Law.

The towering personality who stands at the back of these songs of lamentation is Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the charismatic but unfortunate nationalist leader of Pakistan. Picking up the tune of cry for the martyrdom of Hussain Ibn Ali, the grandson of Prophet Hazrat Muhammad (Peace be upon him), in Kerbala and Hussain ibn Mansur al-Hallaj, the Persian Mystic, the poets mourn for the unjust execution of Z.A. Bhutto on 4 April 1979. He is compared with these two Muslim mystics between whom one represents just leadership after Hazrat Muhammad (Peace be upon him) and the other stands for the courage of-telling the truth (Mansur uttered 'ana'lhaqq' meaning 'I am the Truth' or 'I am Allah'):

You are the envy of Zulfikar,  
 ...  
 O Hussain of my time, salam!  
 O Light of the eyes of martyrs, salam! (Salam 8)

Or

Other Yazids have re-enacted the history of Kerbala.  
 See this new chapter on the slaughter of Hussain. (Farigh17)

Or

At every stage of history we find a lesson from him.  
 Today I see before me the "I" of Mansur. (Waheed 37)

Or

The face of Mansur is eternally alive.  
 You have obliterated your own existence, my people. (Waheed 36)

Yet the poets do not cling to the Muslim tradition only. Qateel Shifai evokes the image of Jesus Christ nicely:

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<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

They rise up against him, who resurrects the dead.  
In every age we have crucified Jesus. (12)

Similarly, J.S. (Javed Shahin) utters, like T.S. Eliot in the first line of *The Waste Land*:

April is the cruellest of all months  
Flowers grow in this month,  
And the land takes on a new shape.  
But that is a real old story.  
For now, it is the month of the death of colour and fragrance,  
And of the martyrdom of flowers,  
...  
Come! People, let us remove this month  
From the calendar. (63)

Again, this leader also is compared with Bilquis, the Queen of Sheba, breaking the barrier of gender discrimination as the ruler:

After the departure of the truthful and just Bilqis,  
What became of the city of Sheba in our age? (Farigh19)

This amalgamation of different legendary personalities into one to magnify his magnitude as a leader can make this collection truly multidimensional in thought and ideas.

*Your Essence, Martyr* can be regarded as an emblem of the rebellious voice that cannot be kept hushed for a long time. These elegies were written in 1979 in Urdu. But the poets could not even use their names in full, except some pseudonyms or initials, in fear of 'the torturer's whip and the hangman's noose' (3). Again, after their publication in the original, 'they have never been seen by anybody except by some Urdu readers' (3), who used to recite them secretly at home or intimately in cafes. Consequently, this collection, published after such a long time, reminds us of the comment of *The New York Times* in their report immediately after the execution of Z.A. Bhutto: 'The way they did it... is going to grow into a legend that will someday backfire.'<sup>1</sup> The poems are obviously a backfire, a boomerang that boldly pronounces: 'I see the crop of tyranny, green and verdant' (37). Or 'He is hidden from sight, but He beats in every heart.' Or 'No matter how much you press him down, He will rise again' (25). The letter of Benazir Bhutto to the editor, attached at the end of the book, also guarantees this truth as this collection came as a solace to the burning heart of a daughter:

I am proud that I am your daughter, Papa;  
The daughter of one who is the Shabbir of this age.  
...  
I could lay down my life, for the way you chose to die; (A Daughter's Lament 85)

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<sup>1</sup>Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. *Wikipedia*. 26 September 2012.



A common contention about translated literature is that ‘Beautiful translations are like beautiful women, that is to say, they are not always the most faithful ones’<sup>2</sup> and like half-veiled beauty, they arouse an irresistible yearning for the original. Nevertheless, in the hand of Rafey Habib, Faruq Hassan and David Matthews, professors of literature, the English translations have become simultaneously beautiful and faithful. Their earnest endeavour to be careful of bilingual sensitivities (3), along with the preservation of the *gazel* and *nazm* form, makes the piece unique. The expressions of emotions and passions of the famous Urdu poets (such as Shohrat Bokhari, Josh Malihabadi, Qateel Shifai, Farigh Bukhari, Jauhar Mir, Ahmed Waheed Akhter, Saleem Shahid, Kishwar Naheed, Zaheer Kashmiri, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Javed Shahin etc.) win the heart as well as the sense. Ironically, plainly, metaphorically and allegorically, they draw imageries from the familiar nature and life around them which carry the readers away to the land of death, darkness and deception, to the land of slaughter, sadness and suppression. We hear Josh Malihabadi saying, envisaging a weary journey through a difficult and thorny way:

Ah God! How long will I tread this difficult path?  
How long will I walk this uneven road? (9)

Or, Farigh Bukhari uttering:

I am afraid of the word ‘deception’,  
But this journey was like a path through a jungle. (14)

Or, A.F. bemoaning:

There is one journey on which  
Not the feet, but the heart tires. (21)

The most repeated imagery used by the poets is of rope around the neck in the gallows:

And your rope  
Brings out  
Your tongue and eyes in wonder, (Shohrat 7)

Or

The gallows of the Messiah of the age smell sweetly (Mir 29)

Or

As a rose bloomed upon the bough of the cross  
On top of the gibbet his face is smiling. (Parvez 34)

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<sup>2</sup>George Steiner in *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*  
[http://www.proz.com/forum/literature\\_poetry/82813-literary\\_translation\\_quotes.htm](http://www.proz.com/forum/literature_poetry/82813-literary_translation_quotes.htm)

The pathetic description of the time also touches our heart when we find A.F. is uttering:

The whole city weeps;  
Even so, how silent it is. (21)

Or, as Shohrat Bukhari:

At this time such a cloud has gathered, which  
Does not clear, or even give rain. (27)

But when the grief becomes unbearable the poets desire to see the Day of Judgment when the just cause will come out:

Although God's creation is now silent,  
Tomorrow this secret will also be revealed. (40)

With all these sorrow-ridden utterances and more, the poems express the picture of the pressed humanity lamenting and sobbing under the pressure of the torturous time. I think first reading of this collection would attract the second and the second the third, and thus the poems would bring back the poetry-lovers again and again to its undying delight of pathos as if the poems urge: 'Do not close the casements of the wounds yet' (Mir 30), 'I am the wound. If I speak, blood will trickle' (Qit'a 31).

### **Umme Salma**

## Sue Isle, *Nightsiders* (Twelfth Planet Press, 2011)

Sue Isle's *Nightsiders* is the first novella in the 'Twelve Planets' series, the Twelfth Planet Press showcase of Australian female speculative fiction writers. *Nightsiders* explores the uncertainties of climate change in a believable setting, and is a noteworthy example of recent Young Adult fiction with dystopian elements.

Three stories are set in Perth, and a fourth in Melbourne. Isle explores a pessimistic version of the speculative enquiry 'what if ...?' She proposes that the West would become inhospitably hot and dry. Perth is abandoned and its residents evacuated to the eastern states. Not everyone has left, though. Isle depicts life for the survivors. The *Nightsiders* sleep during the hot days and live by night.

Isle's setting is mainly plausible and compelling. The first story, 'The Painted Girl', immerses readers in a post-crisis world. In sun-protective robes and head scarves, Kyra and Nerina move across a dusty landscape where water and food are scarce, and strangers are unfriendly. In 'Nation of the Night', Isle explores subtly how Australia's 'tyranny of distance' might persist under a climate change scenario. Ash travels from Perth to Melbourne for gender reassignment surgery. Melbourne is bone-chillingly cold, gloomy, with an ultra-regulatory government. It is also over-crowded; inundated with climate refugees. Ash meets Maoris Mike and Nella, who survived a flu pandemic in New Zealand and escaped to Australia. In this chapter, Isle depicts a painful, moving struggle for belonging and stability. The third and fourth stories explore how residents of an abandoned city survive a crisis. In 'Paper Dragons', teenage scroungers scour suburban houses for useful items and living spaces. In 'The Schoolteacher's Tale', people physically and psychologically move beyond their comfort zones to the 'Edge' of the city. Isle uses details of her setting to achieve coherence and consistency across the four stories. She describes vegetables grown under shade-cloths, desalinated water, and journeys by donkey-cart. Not all assumptions are convincing, though. For instance, non-essential surgery is still available and supply trucks travel to an abandoned city in 'Nation of the Night'.

Isle's themes will appeal to young adult readers. She raises the question of how generational responses to a crisis may differ, thus exploring the classic theme of 'generation gap' between older and younger people. Isle depicts pre-Evacuation adults poignantly: many 'Elders' are frightened to venture into sunlight and the new world. Some are consequently immobile, have unusually pale skin, and are heat-intolerant. Conversely, young people can see in the dark, and are better adapted to water scarcity. The powerful story 'Paper Dragons' investigates young people's development in a post-crisis world. The teenagers find a script for a pre-Evacuation television serial in an abandoned property, and want to perform it as a play. The adults try to avoid the pain of remembering their previous lives, while the young people don't relate to the characters:

I became Brittany ... a girl who thought about clothes and boys as though they were everything ... To her, there was never an Evacuation ... She lived in a cooler, richer world and she never even noticed. (108)

Isle uses a dystopian juxtaposition of hope and fear. The climate crisis represents fear. In 'The Schoolteacher's Tale' Shani and Ichiro's marriage symbolises hope for the future, as does their child, who signifies fertility and survival. Shani and Ichiro move to a new suburb

Book reviews: *Nightsiders* by Sue Isle. Monika Stasiak.  
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<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

beyond the city, demonstrating a willingness to re-define established boundaries. The marriage also provokes negotiations for reconciliation between the indigenous 'tribal' people and the city-dwellers. Hope for human survival depends on sharing skills and knowledge.

Isle does not use the dystopian concept of warning. She makes no obvious causal links between human behaviour and her setting. The plot events occur after the weather has changed, but Isle does not explain whether this could have been prevented. Should climate change writers provoke a paradigm change towards more environmentally responsible behaviour? *Nightsiders* does not provoke a paradigm change and makes no statements about environmentally responsible behaviour. Is *Nightsiders* climate-change dystopia, then? Arguably not.

*Nightsiders* is a strong contribution to the recent wave of speculative narratives surging through the young adult reader market. Sue Isle packs her plot with adventure and the trials of survival in a post-crisis world. She explores provocative issues for young readers, including relationships and social structures, and coming-of-age themes. She raises concerns and hopes for the future. Isle portrays climate change as a pessimistic setting rather than as a consequence of human behaviour. While *Nightsiders* is probably not a dystopian text, it is bold because it speculates on climate change, a scenario that has not yet been represented with certainty in any form of discursive enquiry.

'Nation of the Night' won Young Adult Story of the Year in the 2012 Aurealis Awards. Other texts in the Twelve Planets series so far include:

Deborah Biancotti, *Bad Power*  
Margo Lanagan, *Cracklescape*  
Tansy Rayner Roberts, *Love and Romanpunk*  
Narelle M. Harris, *Showtime*  
Lucy Sussex, *Thief of Lives*  
Kaaron Warren, *Through Splintered Walls*  
Thoraiya Dyer, *Assymetry*

**Monika Stasiak**

**Suzanne Falkiner, *The Imago: E. L. Grant Watson and Australia* (UWA Publishing, 2011)**

Elliot Lovegood Grant Watson (1885-1970) was a British biologist and writer who first came to Australia on an anthropological expedition to Western Australia. While awaiting the remainder of his party, he collected insects for European entymologists, and discovered an affinity for the Australian bush. He wrote of the deep sense of peace and awe evoked by the desert landscape, and over the span of his career, wrote six novels based in Australia. His first novel, *Where Bonds are Loosed* (London, 1914), was based on his experiences on Bernier Island off Western Australia.

At 502 pages, including notes, bibliography, credits and index, *The Imago* would no doubt present a daunting prospect for the reader with little or no interest in E. L. Grant Watson; which only goes to prove that one cannot judge a book by its cover, or in this case, its size. *The Imago* is an entertaining story of a restless, tortured character who prefers to wander the world alone. Yet despite appearing to be a shy and morose young man, Grant Watson is invited to accompany Alfred Reginald Brown and Daisy Bates on expeditions to Bernier and Dorre Islands, and mixes with luminaries such as Gertrude Stein, Joseph Conrad, and in later life, Karl Jung.

There appears to be no plan to Grant-Watson's path. Falkiner's reading suggests his inner life and most of his decisions are governed by his enduring love for a beautiful woman, Ida, whom he cannot marry. However, perhaps one a little less enamoured with Watson than Falkiner might contend Grant Watson is a self-centred individual with scant regard for other people's feelings: he marries a woman he does not love while continuing to pursue a married woman to the detriment of her health and social standing. He even goes so far as to enlist his wife's help when arranging a meeting with Ida in Florence. Ida's husband, James Bedford, finally insists that he cease all contact. Despite the ego-centric callousness he displays toward those close to him, Grant Watson presents as a likeable and interesting character, who as with any other individual makes mistakes and must live with the consequences.

To her credit Falkiner does not allow the love triangle of Watson, his wife Katharine and Ida to dominate the text. She reflects on their entanglements through their separate histories and reads the effects of Ida's estrangement on Grant Watson through his diaries and the letters he sent to his mother while wandering throughout Australia and Europe. In this way, the biography is not the story of one man, but contains insights into the social and domestic workings of the day. Likewise, Falkiner does not allow Grant Watson's writing to take a back seat to his personal life. His writing is studied within the context of his journeys in Australia and his personal experiences of the time, without bogging the reader down in extensive literary criticism. For the reader wishing to know more about particular works, an appendix of the 'Australian' novels is included. Each title has a brief description of plot, characters and theme. This approach works well: the international scope of Grant Watson's academic and personal life, and his writing, is recognised; there is no attempt to squeeze him into the role of 'Australian author'.

Falkiner pinpoints important experiences on Dorre and Bernier Islands in Grant Watson's fiction, but once again, does not take him to task for his ego-centrism.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless

<sup>1</sup> In 1907, the Western Australian government established the Lock Hospitals on Bernier and Dorre Islands for the segregation and cure of mainland Aborigines suffering from diseases. Females occupied the hospital on



she is not completely blind to the flaws in his character, even when she attempts to excuse them. She notes that he ‘makes remarkably scant mention of the Aboriginal patients (or prisoners)’ he encounters on Bernier and Dorre and suggests,

Perhaps, in his state of innocence, he found it easier to ignore the more sordid side of their sojourn: ... It was only in the immediacy of World War II (and after Bates’s own highly subjective account had appeared) that he would look back with mixed emotions, remembering, as well as his exultation, the darker side of their idyll. (134)

The exultation to which Falkiner refers is Grant Watson’s reaction to the landscape, and it was this more than anything else that permeated his Australian novels, and made him ‘a pioneer of literary themes explored decades later by Katharine Susannah Prichard, Randolph Stow and Patrick White’ (Back Cover).

The only complaint I have with *The Imago* is the tenuous link Falkiner attempts to forge between Grant Watson and White. She takes her lead from Dorothy Green’s assessment that ‘in his use of the central desert country of Australia as a symbol of the isolating journey into the self ... [Grant Watson] anticipates Patrick White’s *Voss* by thirty years’ (381) to overstate the coincidence of White’s attendance at Cambridge ‘some two years before the Grant Watsons moved’ there (323). Likewise she conjectures that the two ‘might have been in the same room together’ in February 1934 during a Cambridge Musical Society performance of *Jephtha* because Grant Watson ‘had visited Cambridge often in this period’ (324). While Falkiner’s research is admirable, there seems little to be gained from attempting to connect White and Grant Watson: she herself concedes there is no evidence that White was aware of Grant Watson’s writing.

Overall, *The Imago* is an ambitious autobiography that more than repays the reader for their time. There are too many details to mention in one review. To mention but a few: Grant Watson’s unorthodox early education; his mother’s unusual life, his wife Katharine’s permissive (or perhaps submissive?) acceptance of his passion for Ida, and the early years of Ida’s life in India. Falkiner’s research is exhaustive and her admiration for her subject apparent, but she maintains a sensitive touch, allowing readers to reach their own conclusions. Overall, *The Imago* is an engaging read that should, as the media release suggests, spark renewed interest in Grant Watson’s Australian novels.

**Kathleen Steele**

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Bernier Island and males occupied the hospital on Dorre Island. Daisy Bates described the hospitals in 1910: ‘there is not, among all my sad sojourn amongst the last sad people of the primitive Australian race, a memory one-half so tragic and harrowing, or a name that conjures up such a deplorable picture of misery and horror unalleviated, as these two grim and barren islands off the West Australian coast that for a period, mercifully brief, were the tombs of the living dead’. By 1918, the Lock Hospitals were closed and the few remaining patients moved to hospitals on the mainland. Over nine years of operation, in excess of 700 Aborigines were admitted to the Lock Hospitals, of which at least 162 died on the islands.

Cf: <http://www.sharkbay.org/assets/documents/fact%20sheets/history%20bernier%20and%20dorre%20v2.pdf>

## Sebastian Faulks, *A Possible Life: A Novel in Five Parts* (Hutchinson, 2012)

The disappointing thing about this book is the fact that although it is described as a 'novel in five parts' it is really a collection of very long short stories, or short novellas, each dealing with different characters, and time period, with no thread to link them except that they are about people who struggle in life, one way or another. Some do succeed in finding fulfillment and success, while most come to a resigned acceptance that this is all there is in life and they might as well make the most of it. Had it been described as such a collection rather than a novel, readers would approach it with a different frame of reference and expectations.

Faulks is a master of writing in different voices. While there may be similarities in style and subject matter between *Birdsong* and *The Girl at Lion D'Or*, we find a harsh cynicism in *Egelby* and echoes of Graham Green in *On Green Dolphin Street*. The five stories in *A Possible Life* cover a wide geographical, temporal and emotional span, with enough twists and turns within each story to engage the reader.

Geoffrey Talbot (Part I) is an unexceptional man who, failing to gain entrance into the Diplomatic Corps, settled for the life of a schoolteacher at Crampton Abbey where he also coached cricket. His mundane but satisfying life is changed completely through his experiences in the army and as a prisoner of war, and he returns as a broken shell of a person, who finally finds a peace of sorts.

In the 'Second Sister' (Part II) time has moved back to the time of the workhouse in England. It's a dark, stark story, coming to a far from neat conclusion.

In Part III, set in the future, there is an intriguing reminder of *Wuthering Heights*. A man brings home a young boy as a companion for his daughter, Elena. She, unimpressed, names him Bruno because 'he's brown with dirt all over' (122). Later they become inseparable, roaming the countryside as children, and obsessed with each other as adults. Given the chameleon nature of Faulk's writing, I doubt if this is just a coincidence.

Jeanne, (Part IV), a woman said to be ignorant, serves a French family, bringing up their children in the only way she knows how, with firmness. 'Clémence and Marcel were frightened of Jeanne, but they also laughed at her coarse voice and her face with its watery, short-sighted eyes' (174). To observers Jeanne remains ignorant to the end of her life. She would never claim any importance for herself, although 'each experience affected her idea of what the world was' (192), and she never shares the decisive experience that fashioned her future.

The last story describes the relationship between a successful musician and a young singer whom he encourages and nurtures until she leaves him far behind. Faulks has captured the voice of the era, the casual sex, the drugs, the chasing after contracts, the frustrations and betrayal.

Leaving classification aside, is *A Possible Life* worth reading? I would say yes. The prose is crisp and unembellished. The stories are well crafted, although the last one is too long. Jack who narrates this story through its rites and passages, concludes: 'I'm an actor playing a part I've never mastered' (294).

Perhaps that could be said of the various characters in this collection of stories; perhaps that is the link that binds them together. Perhaps it is just that life deals us all, whenever we are born, and into what circumstances, a varied hand. It could be, as the blurb on the back tells us, the novel 'journeys across continents and time to explore the chaos

created by love, separation and missed opportunities.' None of these is, however, enough to mould these five separate stories into a single novel. They can stand alone as a collection.

**Emily Sutherland**

## Christopher Conti, *Proofs* (Puncher and Wattman, 2012)

You know those snippets in the newspaper which make you laugh because they are truly stranger than fiction? Those tiny 100 to 200 word narratives about someone's silly misfortune or stupid misdeeds? They are the stories that cause someone to invariably yell out across the kitchen table, 'Hey, listen to this', and they are also the stories which spark entire novels from light-fingered writers willing to elaborate. Debut fiction writer Christopher Conti has stuck to the formula of those newspaper oddities and composed an entire book of such stories, aptly titled *Proofs*. It is not an original undertaking, as one of Austria's most prolific writers, Thomas Bernhard, has done this before in his 1997 book *The Voice Imitator*. In fact Conti's final entry is a cheeky tribute to his relationship with Bernhard where Conti just may be the poet who memorised the work of a more famous poet – who just may be Bernhard – and when the more famous poet died, declared it was him all along who wrote the poems, while the now-deceased, more famous poet became sullied as a word-thief. With this final entry, 'Pseudonym', we forgive Conti his template pilfering because he gives credit where credit is due, and does so cleverly, italicising within the text one of Bernhard's often-used phrases in *The Voice Imitator*, 'in the nature of things'. But let's leave Bernhard aside and focus on Conti.

In *Proofs*, Conti creates entire scenarios in less than a single page. There is the Swedish student who engages in lofty conversations with Australian travellers at the Veste Oberhaus in Passau only to pass them off as his own adventures to his parents via postcards; the genius who has given up all intellectual endeavours in order to devote his time to applying for jobs, which he cannot win because he is too smart; the ageing best-selling author who has left behind writing in his endless search for inspiration to write; the famous actor who descended into oblivion in an effort to immerse himself, as he had with acting, in new work and was then deemed even greater than before by his critics, as if his new 'work' was indeed a theatrical performance. These are some of my favourite accounts, and they happen to come at the beginning of the book. I think there is good reason for this. When I began to read *Proofs*, I found I was gobbling up the stories, one after the other in quick succession, amazed with the technique, enamoured with the idea that in one page – sometimes one paragraph or even one sentence – Conti can so succinctly and matter-of-factly show how brilliance is apt to become madness. These are weird and tragic stories written in terse and unbiased journalistic style, ensuring the pathos with which we normally read fiction is obsolete. The neurosis, or simply 'bad luck', works as a paradigm for our times: we live in utter chaos and if we cannot see the humour in it, the absurdity of it, we very well could fall prey to the same level of insanity in which Conti's characters have found themselves. Once I got beyond this *Eureka!* moment and fell into the groove of *Proofs*, however, I began to tire of the formula. Each story begins with a name of a person, a country from where the person hails, and a job description of the person:

After dropping me at the Civic on Pitt Street, the former president of Bolivia, pointing to a pistol under the driver seat of his cab, told me he always kept a weapon near to hand in case of revolution. ('Civic', 36)

Not only was the set-up becoming arduous but the density of the information heaped into a single sentence, and the complexity of the grammatical structure on top of it, was failing to entice me in an ongoing fashion:

A onetime colleague who rose to division head at the National Oceans Office by cultivating a reputation as a Russian chess grandmaster, a reputation which proved invulnerable to validation and invalidation alike and thus consigned all judgment of his character to limbo, has written to me and another onetime colleague for over a year now about his intractable problems with the local council and its compulsory notices and red tape. ('Cordon', 16)

These two components, and the fact that the main characters are habitually males, made me question the book's sustainability. Of course just when you begin to question whether you have the stamina to continue on in this monotonous way, the story of the philosopher of morals pops up. A snippet of pure brilliance and madness in which the philosopher's entire belief system is thrown into turmoil because an Arsenal fan saved a Chelsea fan from an oncoming train. The question of 'why' so plagued him through the years that it became a point of obsession and when, by chance, he saw the Arsenal fan and seized the moment to ask him 'why', he failed to understand the everyday hero's answer as 'the guy obviously needed help - so I helped'. The philosopher of morals threw the Arsenal fan under an oncoming train. Now I see that I, too, am getting caught up in information overload and complex grammatical structures in trying to sum up the story. And that's just it: where the novelist or short story writer has the option to use pages of description to tell the tale, Conti (and myself) only has a few sentences. So rather than let the style drag you down after that initial high, my suggestion is to *not* try to read this book in one sitting, or even two or three. Make sure you give yourself every chance to enjoy the story of the seven Nobel-Prize winning physicists who have checked themselves into an exclusive clinic in Switzerland in order to watch Disney films. It's a little ripper.

**Heather Taylor Johnson**



## David Reiter, *My Planets* (Interactive Press, 2011)

David Reiter subtitles his latest book 'a fictive memoir', which is an essentially contradictory term and at the same time complementary. If 'fictive' is make-believe and 'memoir' is autobiography, where do the two come together?

In *My Planets* Reiter weaves memories of his own upbringing as a white Jewish boy in an American inner-city, with present-day musings of a fifty year-old American Australian who has just found his birth mother after his adoptive parents have died. These stories, presumably, are true. He also gives a third-person account of his birth mother's and father's memories. These, presumably, are not. And I'm not saying that they are false, it's just that one cannot write about one's conception from the points of view of the lovers without using a bit of imagination. After Reiter's father recounts his nightmares of fighting Nazi soldiers in the war, he writes:

The real moon came out from behind a cloud just then, and he looked so pale to her, like an abandoned child. She eased down, covered him with her body. (26)

This has to be imagined. And it is beautifully imagined. These were my favourite passages in the book.

The book is divided into nine parts, each given the title of a planet. This works as a structural link to the psyche of Reiter who, as a child, always felt he didn't quite belong and must have come from outer space and who, as an adult, lives on the other side of the world from where he was born, seeing a whole new set of stars. Each first chapter of each part is told in the voice of the specific planet so each planet, too, has a story to tell. This suggests that stories are both ancient and endless, and no particular story carries any more weight than the next. I love the writing of the planets and think them a clever strand for Reiter to work with, but conceptually I think it has been taken too far: the book's title, its cover, the black and white photographs of the solar system throughout the book. Too much 'planets'.

Alongside crossing over from fiction to memoir, from first person to third person narration and from human to inanimate narrator, Reiter also plays with form. He weaves poetry into prose, and some memories bear both of those titles. This seems a very natural way for a poet/novelist to write and Reiter seems to do it organically. Yet with all of these juxtaposing styles it is no surprise that the chronology of the telling is all over the place: back and forth, and sometimes repetitive. But this is the way memory works. When we think of a person from our past, we don't create a timeline of images. We remember in a much more fluid way. Though this doesn't make for gripping storytelling, it does experiment with memory and art, and so the story is told uniquely. I think the patchwork craft of the book works well for Reiter, placing it in the overall literary genre. But with it comes some confusion as to where all of the names fit into the family, and into *which* family they fit (we are, after all, talking about two mothers, two fathers, both of their mothers and fathers, several siblings, aunts and uncles and children). A family tree at the beginning of the book would have helped this confusion but, given that the crux of the book lies in its disjointed telling, a little confusion doesn't hurt.

Book reviews: *My Planets* by David Reiter. Heather Taylor Johnson.  
*Transnational Literature* Vol. 5 no. 1, November 2012.  
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

Reiter is the founding publisher for IP, which is an interactive press publishing poetry and fiction in print, e-books and multimedia. A 'Reunion Page', as an accompaniment for the book, is soon to be published on IP's website, but for now you can visit it on <http://www.facebook.com/MyPlanetsReunionMemoir>.

**Heather Taylor Johnson**

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

## Gary Shteyngart, *Super Sad True Love Story* (Granta, 2010)

After the much-praised *Absurdistan*, Gary Shteyngart's third novel brings high expectations in its wake. It is the story of Lenny Abramov, a 39 year-old Russian-American, and his romance with Eunice Park, a Korean-American who he meets in Rome, but a Rome of the future. Here, Lenny is selling an immortality drug for his company Post-Human Services; his opening statement to the reader is that he is never going to die. In this typically *not* brave new world, books are seen as suspect, outdated and even smelly; today's world of mobile phones, facebook and twitter has progressed to one where privacy is a thing of the past. Everyone carries a device called an *äppärät* which allows them to have access to intimate details about their peers or new acquaintances.

In this world, in which traditional notions of the human are disappearing, Lenny writes an old-fashioned diary, which comprises half the narrative of the book. The other half, by contrast, consists of the electronic communications from Eunice to her friends and family. The story seems to be set 10 or 20 years in the future, in a time when a neo-con America has collapsed economically and China is the world's superpower. America is at war with Venezuela; when Lenny and Eunice arrive there, the country descends rapidly into civil war. This plot summary (saving, of course, the neatly surprising end) makes it clear that *Super Sad True Love Story* is that very fashionable thing, a dystopia. Shteyngart's novel has been linked to the work of David Foster Wallace, Jonathan Lethem, Tom Wolfe and Philip Roth; other useful contemporary parallels are Margaret Atwood and Maggie Gee. It is science fiction, but also a romance; it is a satire of modern America, and an effectively comic one. Thus the novel is an ambitious compendium of genres, with more narrative drive and sheer *joie de vivre* than many contemporary dystopias. It wears its politics lightly, and encourages us to care about its protagonists, something that many more self-consciously worthy novels fail to do.

One of the novel's strengths is the quality of the writing. Lenny's diary is elegant, illustrated when he reflects on Rome: 'The city of Rome appeared around us, casually splendid, eternally assured of itself, happy to take our money and pose for a picture, but in the end needing nothing and no one' (21). This is original and convincing. Similarly, Lenny memorably describes himself as 'a man who lived in death's anteroom and could barely stand the light and heat of his brief sojourn on earth' (23). The contrast between this voice and that of Eunice is effective, and the style appropriate to each character: a typical phrase from the latter is 'Sup, my little Busy Bee-iotch? I'm baaaaaaack.' (110). The novel shows that the epistolary mode can be usefully morphed to depict the contemporary world in its representation of comically contrasting methods of communication. It is also a memorable evocation of the city, and of how outsiders in it come together: Lenny and Eunice are both effectively migrants, coming to a (future) America from the outside. Immigration as a theme makes the novel topical; it also means that America is seen not merely in the future, but also through an outsider's eyes, giving a doubly distancing effect. The distance helps the satire.

As is so frequently the case, I found that the book did not quite live up to the glowing reviews. One of the reasons for this is that, although Eunice's communications are sometimes amusing, the style (deliberately) jars, and the joke becomes repetitive. The contrast between Lenny's eloquence and her abruptness loses its effectiveness. In addition, the success of the humour depends on the individual taste of the reader. The novel won the

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Bollinger Everyman Wodehouse prize for comic fiction, a prize that goes to a novel that has captured the comic spirit of the author: clearly, Shteyngart has achieved something which many, but not everyone (this reviewer included) will enjoy.

*Super Sad True Love Story* is not a perfect book; it is so fashionable and contemporary in its content and politics that it is likely to date quickly. On the other hand it is noteworthy for its combination of genres, its energy, and the manner in which it makes us realise that its world is one that is all too possible.

**Nick Turner**